

AN EXPLORATION OF THE LIMINAL IN EMMA DONOGHUE'S ROOM

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ABSTRACT

The article seeks to navigate the fluid space of transition and transformation as represented in Emma Donoghue's novel *Room* (2010). The transgression from the limitations of captivity causes dysfunction in the social bearing of the domestic space in the given context. The text offers a space for negotiation of identity and belongingness through a refreshing narration of a boy. A psychological and discursive analysis of the fiction inspired by a real-life incident, is attempted hereby.

Keywords: liminality, liminal space, transition, belonging, discourse, outside, Donoghue.

References to the concept of 'liminality' and 'liminal space' are often derived from anthropological frameworks such as "rites of passage" as proposed by 'Arnold van Gennep'; Victor Turner's "period of structural invisibility" in dissolution of social hierarchies; as evoking an "eerie" sense in aesthetics and architecture in the work of Mark Fisher and a contemporary comprehension of the temporal as well as spatial, in digital spaces and psychology. Bhaba's idea of "third space" as that of 'transition' and 'threshold' in "*The location of Culture*" is also pertinent in viewing the usage of the term in the context of the article attempting to explore albeit limitedly- "the liminal" in the novel, *Room* (2010) by Emma Donoghue.

Room by Emma Donoghue is narrated by a five-year-old- 'Jack' who lives with his mother in an 'eleven by eleven' foot room comprising a small kitchen, a bathtub, a wardrobe, a bed and a TV. Jack believes that the room along with all its components which include Ma and himself, are the only real things. The rest of the world that Jack sees on the television, are fiction for him. This is the story that Ma tells him to make peace with the unbearable captivity of her son and herself. Jack is unaware that 'Old Nick' kidnapped 'Ma' and has kept her imprisoned in a room for the past seven years. Jack is the product of Old Nick's rape of 'Ma'. In a successful attempt at freeing her son from the room, the two escape and are taken care of, in a mental hospital until recuperation. The new world and its experiences are baffling especially for Jack. Donoghue had composed this work after hearing about the 'Fritzl crime scene in Austria' ("Cellar in abuse case described". BBC News. 5th May, 2008. Retrieved May 2015.). The novel by 'Donoghue' has been adapted into a film whose screenplay was written by Donoghue herself even before the book was published. The film had its world premiere in 2015. It has acquired critical acclaim from critics and won itself numerous nominations and awards. Through the voice of five-year-old, who has spent his whole life imprisoned in a tiny, sealed room with his mother, Ma, Emma Donoghue's psychologically engrossing novel *Room* (2010) examines captivity, survival, motherhood, and identity. Because language serves as a device for the construction, resistance, and transformation of reality rather than just a method of communication, the novel illustrates how power functions through control over space, knowledge, language, and identity rather than just through physical violence (*The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 1969). Discourse both moulds the characters' perception of the world and serves as a weapon of resistance against oppression, as the book makes clear.

In the novel, the captor tentatively regulates power by limiting the movement of 'Ma' and Jack. The psychosis behind the act of kidnapping and imprisonment of the victim for years together, is sidelined from the centre stage. The narrative primarily delves into the relationship between the child and the mother. The circumstantial upbringing of Jack is deprived of the mother's remotest choice. He is circumstantially borne. Oblivious to the harsh realities of his being, he is a respite to the reader from the inhumane backdrop of the storyline.

The extra-ordinary breakthrough of Jack and Ma from the Room is based on their undying faith in each other. The duo dismantles the shackles of the unlawfully imposed confinement. What follows through, offers

premise of analytical reading of discourse, narrativity and dialectic. Ironically, the prison like atmosphere had become a beautiful improvisation of limited faculties. It catered to Jack as closely as homes for other children under normal circumstances, did. The intelligible schedule and activities organised by 'Ma' kept Jack healthy and balanced through nearly cavemen conditions. Eventually, they escaped the atrocities but simultaneously abandoned their home. Room spoke of the atrocities but also bound them unequivocally. With 'Room' (Jack addressed their room as a proper noun as if it were a living entity), they lost their home too. Their space was gone. Their cross-border venture was the dire need of the hour but the repercussions affected them. Considering how the outside world affects their life later (singular unit as Jack thought of himself and Ma), we see the protagonist suffering from separation anxiety. The separation is not only in context of the mother-child relationship but also from the previous identity of the both. 'Ma' was possibly anxious about her previous self in 'Room', the anxiety is in context of herself as the mother and not as the captive. The prying eyes of the media, newspaper and television judge her ordeal. She feels as if she is under perpetual scrutiny even after making it through a nightmare of a lifetime. She escapes from the clutches of 'Old Nick's' limited supplies and bare minimum allowances. She breaks away from slavery, nonetheless falling into the constant perusal by society and media. Not only that, her own father refuses to accept 'Jack' as family and breaks her heart.

The outside world serves as the 'liminal space' in the transformation through the phase of rehabilitation. They reach out for the lost part of themselves as mother and child. Not that the current change was unwanted but that it had its own price to pay. They start off from 'Room' and transition back to their secure abode and sense of shelter with a unique sense of space. This new concept in their lives offers them a space in the collective sense along with the individual. 'Room' was enslaving. But so is the outside world, now. The third level of development in the process, is the new apartment for 'Jack' and 'Ma' in the outside world. This is accompanied and influenced by Jack and his mother's last visit to 'Room'. The last visit gives Jack, much needed closure. As he bids adieu to every component in room that accompanied him through the five years, he bids farewell to the part of him that is inseparable from 'Room'.

Earlier in the novel, we see its tinge in Jack about the rat, the spider-web and in how he keeps little things from his mother. Even the narrative voice is his own- exclusively observant in nature, where he talks about things in the room and about 'Ma' e.g "she's gone" which implies her dizziness from painkillers for toothaches, perhaps. He is similarly attentive about 'Old Nick' during captivity, while also as observant the outside world with the health centre, doctor-staff and the T.V interviewer. Until they come out, Jack cannot comprehend that Ma could have her own thoughts and opinions. He had never learnt to entertain the idea of Ma's privacy, given the two meant the world to each other since the time he was born.

In the room, Jack's character was very considerate. He made sure not to disturb 'Ma' and manage the day by himself when Ma was 'gone'; "gone" is the term he used to refer to his mother's condition on days and slept through the day. She possibly suffered from bouts of depression or/and effects of painkillers for her teeth or/and menstrual cycles which is never directly addressed in the text. It seems to be deliberately kept out of Jack's knowledge probably left for the readers to decipher. These snippets provide us with Jack's discretion on giving the mother, space. His inquisitive little mind unaware of precise reasons still lets her be, even at times when she seems to be "gone (75)" for more than a day.

The contrast in internalising the physical measurements of the room is horrifying for Ma and matter of fact for Jack. As a child, he occupies the liminal space challenging the conventional idea of home and belonging. After their escape, he is a deemed source of abjection for Ma's identity and stability (Kristeva). Escaping the traumatic space did not set them free. They carry the complexities of their identity from their previous residence. The world on the outside, does not limit their movement within tangible measurements. It does shelter them like their previous provider. It does offer them psychiatric and rehabilitation assistance. But simultaneously, parts of the outside world rummages in their captivity to provide fodder for public consumption. It is in this phase of disillusionment that 'Ma' faces the extension of her trauma.

Drawing upon Julia Kristeva's idea of "abjection", the process comprises- excluding parts of oneself to establish one's integrity. It is a sense of 'otherness' that inculcates so as for us to exclude the

maternal/mother- the object that has created us so we can construct an identity. The cast out facet of the identity becomes external to the subject. The "abject" according to Kristeva, exists somewhere between the 'subject- oneself' and the 'object -that which has been cast off'. The abject is neither the object nor the subject itself. It is situated at a place that precedes the 'symbolic order' It therefore occupies a "liminal space".

Jack's world for a long time is largely dependent on his mother until its rupture when he has to leave 'Room' with 'Old Nick'. As soon as he enters the outside world for the first time, he corresponds to the whiff of newness in the air. He constantly thinks about his mother as his muse and source of strength. There is no casting off, of his unitary identification with Ma. He has taken up the courageous venture just for his mother. The first-hand experience of being on his own, without the physical presence of 'Ma' usher him to the process of "abjection". Even though he keeps a track of Ma's tooth in his sock, being scraped on the road and bitten by the dog makes him bleed for the first time. He has never bled before this time. It exposes him to strange spectacles and senses.

"Don't move don't move don't move JackerJack stay stiff stiffstiff. I'm squished in Rug, I can't breathe right, but dead don't breathe anyway... The beep beep again, then the click that means Door is open. The ogre's got me, fee fie foe fum. Hot on my legs, oh no, (Penis let) some pee is out. And also a bit of poo squirted ont my bum, Ma never said this would happen. Stinky. Sorry, Rug. A grunt near my ear, Old Nick's got me tight... I count my teeth but I keep losing count... Are you there, Tooth? I can't feel you but you must be in my sock, at the side. You're a bit of Ma, a little bit of Ma's dead spit riding along with me. I can't feel my arms. The air's different. Still the dustiness of Rug but when I lift my nose a tiny bit I get this air that's... Outside (171)."

However, Jack's experience of coming out to the 'Outside' involves multiple levels of abjection, in Kristevan fashion, having to deal with corporeal fluids, fear, fantasies of dismemberment, and violence. It is in fact the soothing comfort of chewing one of his mother's teeth that gives him the courage to come out into a different material space. This also means that although Jack is now moving to the Outside and becoming aware of the world he still feels continuous with his mother's body and not separate from it. Jack says:

"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 Ma.' I didn't know it was hers-not-mine. In Room everything was ours (275)."

The idea of individual spaces creeps into the narrative as Jack discovers unknown facts about things. According to Foucault (1995), in disciplinary society, social command is constructed and regulated by a network which Althusser calls ideological and repressive apparatuses. These apparatuses prescribe norms, customs and behaviours with the suppression of any alternate defiance. The systematic exercise of power through technologies can be seen on Jack. His corporeal presence is under constant surveillance through measurements, new clothes, needles, mask etcetera. Various mechanisms of disciplinary control saturate his individual scope of development. They aggravate his uneasiness in the new world in the name of protecting him. The discomfort caused, weighs equally or possibly more on his mother. Jack reflects on the contrast of himself feeling safe and sound in 'Room' and scared, outside.

The outside world serves as a pragmatic platform for their transition. It entails a process of unlearning the past and re-learning all over again, not only for Jack but also for his mother. The article in the newspaper discovered by Jack read-

"HOPE FOR BONSAI BOY. He is "Miracle Jack" to the staff at the exclusive Cumberland Clinic... product of his beautiful young mother's serial abuse at the hands of the Garden-shed Ogre...still goes up and down the stairs on all fours like a monkey... degree of long-term developmental retardation (269)."

In the confinement of 'Room', Jack upheld a sense of freedom which seems to be curtailed in the outside world. Along with his mother, he notices people constantly hovering over- from the doctors, staff, the television people and the puffy haired interviewer. The institutional control watching them now was absent

while they were in 'Room'. The interesting reversal in perception takes place when they enter the seemingly functional ways of the world. The disciplinary mechanisms like the media, the hospital, and the police attempt to mark his body as messy and imperfect.

One of the days when Ma is "gone (301)", Jack gets to meet 'Uncle Paul', 'Deane' and 'Bronwyn' for the first time. The day out, acquaints Jack with many a new thing along with his kin, the mall and his first raindrop. After he gets back, he finds his mother unconscious. She had overdosed on her pills- a definite suicidal attempt. This leads to Jack spending his days at his grandmother's place. His stay, opens up a whole new world to him. He is now without his mother around, mostly by himself. Even though the grandmother watches over him, it turns out to be the most drastic phase in his transitioning outside. Jack's grandparents' house represents yet another disciplinary training space for Jack. He has to deal with the absence of his mother for the first time in life. Despite repeated assurances from Grandma, he wonders what really went wrong with his mother.

"Are you just playing she's alive? ...Because if she's not, I don't want to be either (316)." 'Ma sings me songs but there's no more of them anymore. She smashed my head on the table in Room Number Seven. She took the bad medicine, I think she was too tired to play anymore, she was in a hurry to get to Heaven so she didn't wait, why she didn't wait for me (320)?"

This instance is primarily important for its climatic essence that defines a rounded realisation for the five-year-old. The fact that his mother is an individual by herself, strikes his consciousness. He wonders if 'Ma' is tired of having him around, accompanying him or precisely being his mother. Until now, the mother and child are seen to be struggling with the abrupt change in their lives. 'Ma' has been rooting back to her identity, freedom, family and the sense of home. In the process she assures Jack of their connection and caters to him. Similarly, Jack has been fighting insecurities and observing the drastic change around him. They move along in the struggle. They were together in the solace of 'Room'. They were together in the execution of the escape. They remained together in fighting the multifaceted tossing by the society. But at this juncture of his mother's consumption of "bad medicines", 'Jack' feels left out. It is beyond his comprehension why 'Ma' would do something willingly that could separate him from her. The last chapter of the novel- "Living", concludes the text and weighs massively in the journey of the protagonist. Besides an emotional read, it is serene in nature. The child is anxious but alone. He has the world at his disposal but it means nothing to him without his mother. The deliberation in Ma's act and consequent stay-over at his grandparents' place, is a quietly devastating realisation for Jack.

In this episode, Jack learns more about the ways of the world. He gets stung by a bee, gets sunburnt and chapped, gets his first haircut, goes out with his grandmother and observes people in the humdrum of life. He has his first pleasant interaction with a child named 'Walker', in the library after his weird encounter with the 'girl on the swing'. He hugs 'Walker' with joy and ends up knocking him down, accidentally.

"Also everywhere I'm looking at kids, adults mostly don't seem to like them, not even the parents do. They call the kids gorgeous and so cute, they make the kids do the thing all over again so they can take a photo, but they don't want to actually play with them, they'd rather drink coffee talking to other adults. Sometimes, there's a small kid crying and the Ma of it doesn't even hear".

The narrator's meticulous perception and pertinent observations of the seemingly functional world that consists of other children like himself and their guardian(s)/ parent(s)/ mother(s), offers a commentary for the readers of the novel. A refreshing take, on the emotional quotient of children; the social intelligence of a child who is ironically under perpetual scrutiny of the society is seen in the aforementioned excerpt. Adults tend to allocate wisdom and utility in their own social behaviours while trivialising a child's point of view in the way the children are obsessively conditioned to specific codes of conduct, civility, manners, discipline and shows of normativity. A curbing of 'childlike enthusiasm' and 'wonder' as may have been an ideal Blake's romantic expression of 'innocence' posited against 'experience', becomes traceable in contemporary fiction via expectations of palatable social norms.

'Jack' eventually learns to let go of things from the past, that initially mattered. It is difficult but he tries as he affirms his conviction of keeping intact the essence of those things. 'Ma' asserts her need to have a space at times that she could call exclusively her own. Initially, he is averse to the idea but goes on to accept it. *"We practice being in two rooms and calling out to each other... When I'm in JACK'S ROOM and Ma's in MA'S ROOM, that's not so bad, only when she's in other rooms but I don't know which, I don't like that (383)."* They go on to make what may be called a 'Bucket List' for activities they have tried and would like to try. In the process of adjusting into the new "home" Jack has an urge to visit 'Room' even for a minute. His mother's aversion to the idea, fails to deter Jack and they end up visiting 'Room'. When he stands in there with Ma, he can sniff the whiff of change. He says that 'Room' doesn't feel like 'Room' anymore with the door open. He is touched with a sense of redemption at this last visit to 'Room' and bids adieu to each occupant that emanated life before. It looks like a "crater where something happened (401)." After having crossed the borders of the seemingly safest place in the whole wide world, it ceases to remain what it was.

The liminal space that Jack and Ma seem to occupy after the escape, evokes traces of a lost past and perceived futures. The bidding adieu to 'Room' becomes a simulation of "passage of rites" (Arnold Van Gennep), a 'coming of age' for Jack and an eerie experience of a simultaneous persistence of lurking "presence and absence" (Mark Fisher) encapsulating a certain "haunted-ness". The state thus addressed by the voice of the narrator seems to be devoid of a fixed position, representation or identification within the standard social structure (Victor Turner). The cognitive dissonance ramified in the process, become explicitly perceivable not only in the narrator but also his mother. The transitory nature of their redemption is imbued with the ambivalence and disorientation that Homi Bhabha would call the "liminal" space, a "hybrid site" in the production of a cultural meaning beyond a mere reflection.

"Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonist or affiliative, are produced performatively. The representation of difference must not be hastily read as a reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seek to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation....It is in this sense that the boundary becomes the place from which something begins its presencing in a movement not dissimilar to the ambulant, ambivalent articulation of the beyond that I have drawn out: 'Always and ever differently the bridge escorts the lingering and hastening ways of men to and fro, so that they may get to other banks...The bridge gathers as a passage that crosses'. (The Location of Culture 1994).

Jack's narrative voice makes space for interrogating socially sanctioned constructions. He not only imbues life into inanimate objects but does so with utter simplicity. Beyond offering a lens to view its social set ups and cultural demeanour at large, it locates the struggle and overcoming on a subjective level. The self-allocated righteous authority of larger institutions like the society may undermine the integrity of smaller units. The prescribed ways of social life and designated responsibilities, lead people to comprehend reality in a certain way. This fosters a kind of ostracising anything that does not fit in. The elemental bond and accountability in human relationships may transcend kinship and regular patterns. In that sense, 'Room' upholds an untraditional and dysfunctional idea of a domestic space. The novel as an interesting text is seen traversing the spaces of narrativity, discourse and dialectic with a deliberate positioning of a child, the narrator as the primary point of view to comment on the apparent functionality and normativity of domestic space and public discourse. The foregrounding of an otherwise infantilised perspective and backgrounding of the perpetrator becomes critical in analyses of discourse in social and cultural representation via fiction. Resistance as a transgressive force in locating identities, dislocating enforced ones while relocating a non-linear perception of the self underscores the fluidity of an ever-evolving notion of self, identity, home or belonging. 'Room' offers a nuanced space of exploration of what can be called a 'back and forth' negotiation of one's sense of identity in a narrowed local or wider global geopolitical and affective space of relational belonging.

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