

Exploration of Confinement and Freedom in Emma Donoghue's *Room*

Abhijeet Sharma

Research Scholar
Department of English
Chaudhary Charan Singh University
Meerut.

Abstract-

This paper is an attempt at exploring the themes of freedom and confinement in Emma Donoghue's *Room* (2010). The novel tells the story of Ma and her five-year old son Jack who have been held captive inside a garden shed which they both simply call "room". Thematically, the novel can be bifurcated into two parts: the first half focusing on Ma and Jack's confinement and the second half dealing with their eventual freedom which comes at a price. The novel shows the reality of life under involuntary confinement and also what happens when one is suddenly given too much freedom to process. It compels the readers to reexamine their preconceived notions about freedom and confinement. Donoghue experiments with the narrator, choosing the narrative perspective of the child instead of his mother, whose stoic and matter-of-fact description of their confined existence is deeply unsettling to the reader. Through this novel, Donoghue also underscores the dichotomy between confinement and freedom as experienced by the mother and her son.

Key words: Confinement, Freedom, Existence, Narrator, Society.

Emma Donoghue (1969-) is an Irish-Canadian author, literary historian and screenwriter. Her novel *Room* was published in 2010 and became an international bestseller. It won the Hughes & Hughes Irish Novel of the Year, the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize (for best Canadian novel), the Commonwealth Prize (Canada & Caribbean Region), the Canadian Booksellers' Association Libris Awards (Fiction Book and Author of the Year), the Forest of Reading Evergreen Award, the W. H. Smith Paperback of the Year Award and the University of Canberra Book of the Year. It was shortlisted for the 2011 Orange Prize, was shortlisted for Man Booker Prize and won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize regional prize (Caribbean and Canada) in 2011. It was adapted by Donoghue into a film, also titled *Room*, released in 2015. The film adaptation was both critically and commercially acclaimed. In 2016, Donoghue was nominated for Golden Globe, BAFTA and Academy Award, among others, for her screenplay. Donoghue also adapted her script for the stage in 2017 to critical acclaim.

Donoghue's novel was inspired by the infamous Fritzl case, which came to light in 2008. In Austria, Elisabeth Fritzl told the police how she had been held captive for 24 years by her own father Josef who regularly subjected her to physical assault, rape and sexual abuse during her captivity. This resulted in Elisabeth giving birth to seven children, all of whom were fathered by her father Josef. The case received extensive coverage in international media. Josef Fritzl was sentenced to life imprisonment in 2009.

Before further discussion, we must reflect on the meaning of the word freedom. When we talk about freedom, we tend to do so in a physical sense. In this sense freedom is the ability to do anything we want to without any restraint or obstacle. We ignore the fact that freedom is more than just physical freedom. It is also mental freedom, which is being able to think clearly with a calm and peaceful mind and it is also emotional freedom, which is being able to express our inner thoughts and feelings without any restrictions.

In *Room*, Donoghue highlights the lack of physical as well as mental freedom which has been imposed on Ma and Jack by their captor. Physically Ma and Jack are confined by Old Nick in his soundproof garden shed. They are forced to live in solitary confinement with no contact with anyone from outside and without any knowledge of what is happening in the world outside. When Ma finally reveals to Jack her life before

she was confined in the room and the freedom she had, he finds it hard to understand what life is like outside the walls of the room. “We could do what we like, we’d be free” (115), Ma tells him. Mentally their freedom is also limited. Unlike other five year olds, Jack has a different way of perceiving the world around him which is limited to the walls in the room. On the other hand, Ma is constantly living a life where she is traumatized by not only the memories of her life before she was kidnapped but also by Old Nick’s abuse towards her. Emotionally Ma finds it hard to express her true thoughts and feelings in the room. She keeps them suppressed inside her mind for the sake of Jack’s safety.

The narrative of *Room* is divided into five parts, namely, Presents, Unlying, Dying, After and Living. It is narrated by Jack who has just turned five year old. His existence has been confined to a garden shed and his experience of the world is limited to what he has learned from his mother and television. In his disarmingly innocent and simple voice, Jack describes his daily routine with his mother. He personifies the different objects he sees around him and names them as if they are living things, viz. Table, Mirror, Wardrobe, Refrigerator, Thermostat, Skylight and Room. Throughout the novel, we never learn Ma’s name; her entire identity is constructed through Jack’s perspective. At first his life seems similar to that of a regular five year old child. But gradually the reader comes to realise the shocking truth which Jack is blissfully ignorant of: that he is being kept in solitary confinement with his mother who was kidnapped by the man whom they call Old Nick. He has held her captive for seven years in the room and has repeatedly subjected her to rape and physical abuse. Earlier she gave birth to a baby girl but she died. Jack is her second child which is probably why she is overprotective towards him. She does not let Old Nick see Jack and hides him in the Wardrobe every night. Even though Jack doesn’t realise it, he instinctively senses that his mother is in some kind of danger whenever their captor visits them at night to rape her. Old Nick brings supplies for them but he constantly berates Ma and tells her how lucky she is to have all the things which he provides for them. Under these circumstances, she tries her best to give Jack the love and care that he needs. To protect Jack from the gruesome reality of his existence, his mother has told him that only whatever they see in the room is real, what they see on television is not.

It is worth noting that the name of the captor is never revealed to the reader. Throughout the novel, he is referred to as Old Nick. According to Jack, “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”. (14) Ma’s refusal to name her abuser is telling. It is probably because she doesn’t want to humanise him. This thought is echoed in Jack’s words: “I’m not actually sure if he’s real for real. Maybe half? I think Ma doesn’t like to talk about him in case he gets realer”. (22)

Even though Ma is oppressed and confined by Old Nick, her identity as a mother gives her a fulfillment and a sense of purpose. Before Jack was born, she was all alone in her captivity and her life was devoid of any meaning which almost drove her to insanity. She is still a prisoner but being Jack’s mother gives her life a new meaning. To help her cope with isolation, she has created a daily routine for themselves which allows her to pretend that there is at least some semblance of normalcy in her life inside the room.

On the other hand, Jack’s perception of the world is limited to whatever he sees and experiences in the room. It is not merely his home, but his entire world. His world has been built around the comforting lies he has been told by his Ma. Unlike his mother, he is not unhappy. He feels content with his life inside the room. But his mother knows that he is being deprived of a normal childhood inside the confines of the room.

Ma also learns from Old Nick that he has been jobless for six months. One night during Old Nick’s visit to the room, Jack steps out of his bed to look at him. He suddenly wakes up and Ma attacks him as he tries to go near Jack. As a punishment for her behavior, Old Nick cuts off the power supply to the room and also stops bringing them food and supplies. Now Ma realises that Old Nick would rather let them die than let anyone discover his secret. She tells Jack that “We’re like people in a book, and he won’t let anybody else read it.” (112)

Ma now begins to formulate a risky plan for their escape from confinement. She gradually starts “unlying” (106) to Jack. She tells him “I couldn’t tell you before, because you were too small to understand, so I guess I was sort of lying to you then. But now you’re five, I think you can understand.” (106) She tries to convince Jack that there is a world outside the room where they can be safe and have freedom to go anywhere and do anything they want to. With initial difficulty she eventually manages to convince Jack

about the reality of their confined existence. When Ma is brainstorming ideas to escape the room, Jack wonders how they are “like in a book, how do people in a book escape from it?” (130) Jack is initially reluctant to leave behind his comfort zone but eventually agrees to help Ma in successfully accomplishing their mission which they call the “great escape”. Their plan involves Jack pretending to be “dead” and being put into a rug. Ma convinces Old Nick to take Jack’s “corpse” away for burial. Old Nick takes the rug containing Jack in his truck. After some struggle Jack manages to crawl out of the rug but his actions catch the attention of Old Nick, who realises he has been tricked and stops the truck. Jack jumps out of the truck and starts running. Old Nick catches Jack who starts screaming and this scene is witnessed by a man who grows suspicious and tells him that he is going to call the police. This makes Old Nick dump Jack on the ground and escape in his truck. A friendly and compassionate officer questions Jack and manages to decipher enough clues which help them in locating Old Nick’s house and rescuing Ma.

Ma had hoped that gaining freedom would provide her with a fresh start to build a new life with Jack. But she hadn’t anticipated that freedom, for both of them, would come at a great price. After gaining their freedom, both react in a different manner. Immediately after being rescued by the police, Ma ecstatically tells Jack that “We can do anything now.” (193) On the other hand, Jack’s first experience with the outside world has left him disappointed and disillusioned: “I’ve seen the world and I’m tired now.” (193) Ma realises that Jack is not happy and wishes to go back to his bed inside the room. After a brief interrogation, they are taken to the Cumberland Clinic, a private psychiatric facility where they can be sheltered from unwanted attention of the media. Shortly after their arrival at the clinic, they are informed by the police that their captor has been arrested. Here they begin their recovery under the supervision of Dr. Clay.

Even though they’ve gained freedom, their ordeal is far from over. Ma struggles to cope with her re-encounter with the outside world after seven years. She reunites with her family but learns that a lot has changed: her parents have divorced, her father is now living in Australia, her mother has remarried, and her brother is married now and has a daughter. She realises how much the world has moved ahead without her and now it only views her as a victim. She now becomes irritable and easily gets mad at other people who she feels are treating her as an object of pity. During her treatment in the clinic, she becomes increasingly depressed and often longs to go back to her life before captivity. But for the sake of Jack she tries her best to brave through every difficulty.

Matters come to a head when Ma agrees to do a television interview. She does it to raise money for Jack’s college fund. But the interview does not go smoothly and turns out to be a difficult experience for Ma. The woman who interviews Ma asks her many inappropriate and insensitive questions. At first she mentions the term “Stockholm syndrome” which leads Ma to retort that she hated Old Nick. As the interview progresses, she asks Ma about her “relationship” with Old Nick and also mentions the stillbirth of her first child, something which was not supposed to be brought up. The woman also expresses her surprise on Ma still breastfeeding Jack which further upsets her. She keeps asking questions which make Ma uncomfortable and even suggests that she should have given up Jack for adoption which would have provided him with a normal childhood and saved him from a confined existence. This distresses Ma very much and she breaks down completely. This incident demonstrates how the world tends to victimise the victim repeatedly. Ma is made to revisit the painful details of her past and is also forced to justify her choices of keeping Jack alive and safe from harm.

Ma is so distressed with her ordeal that she decides to end her life. Fortunately she survives her suicide attempt. With the help of the doctors and her loved ones, she gradually finds enough strength to cope with her difficulties. Donoghue implies that even though Ma has gained freedom from confinement, she would still be dealing with its effects for the rest of her life. This becomes apparent to the reader when Ma refuses to visit the zoo with Jack because the mere sight of cages makes her uncomfortable. Furthermore, at the end of the novel when she revisits the Room with Jack, she vomits and insists on the door being left open when she goes inside.

On the other hand, Jack also struggles to cope with his newfound freedom, albeit in a manner which is much different from that of his mother. For his entire life, Room has been the place which provided him with a sense of security and belonging. It was not merely a home for him, it was his entire world. Ma was the only family he ever knew. But outside he has to face many difficulties like social adjustment, spatial perception, etc. His experience outside the Room is unpleasant for him and he frequently has bad dreams.

He finds it hard to stay away from Ma even for a moment. Even small things like the lights, wind and people trying to talk to him are distressing for him. Jack's behaviour often frustrates others including Grandma. His visit to the mall with his uncle Paul turns out to be a disaster. He accidentally steals a book and even touches his cousin Bronwyn inappropriately. Jack is shown to be slowly expanding his circle of trust but he also needs to become aware about certain rules of behaviour and social taboos.

Jack needs to develop his own identity outside the Room by letting go of things which governed his life when he was inside it. But doing so is not so simple. He is eventually forced to free himself from his need to always be with Ma when she is recovering from her suicide attempt. He slowly starts making progress and learns to trust others and communicate with them in the absence of his mother. At the end of the novel when he goes to bid a final farewell to the Room and his old life he realises that it has changed and he doesn't feel any attachment to it. This demonstrates that Jack is now slowly but steadily evolving. Now he seems to be ready to leave his past life behind him.

Through this fascinating story Donoghue makes the reader question their notions about confinement and freedom. Are we really as free as we think ourselves to be? In the novel we see how Ma longs to regain her freedom from confinement in the Room. But once she escapes from it, does she really get the freedom which she wanted? Or is she transported from one cage to another one which is shaped by societal expectations, beliefs and morality and is perhaps as restrictive in some ways as the Room? The novel doesn't provide any easy answers, probably because there aren't any. It also demonstrates how society can oppress an individual by imposing its own ideals and morality on them. Using the unique narrative voice of a five year old child, Donoghue urges the reader to develop a new outlook towards the old beliefs and human values of the society.

REFERENCES:

1. Donoghue, Emma. *Room*. London: Picador, 2011. Print.
2. "Room." EmmaDonoghue.com, <https://www.emmadonoghue.com/books/novels/room-the-novel.html>.
3. "Room Study Guide." GradeSaver.com, <https://www.gradesaver.com/room>.