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Editor : Saikat Banerjee

Editor: Dr. Saikat Banerjee
Lecturer, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
St. Theresa International College, Thailand.



Book Review : Emma Donoghue *ROOM* (2010)

Aashima Rana
M.Phil Scholar
University of Delhi

It's Jack's birthday and he's excited about turning five. He lives with his Ma in Room, which has a locked door and a skylight, and measures 11feet by 11 feet. He loves watching TV, and the cartoon characters he calls friends, but he knows that nothing he sees on screen is truly real- only him, Ma and the things in Room. Until the day Ma admits that there's a world outside...

Emma Donoghue's *Room* (2010) is primarily an account of the psychological journey of a five year old boy Jack whose world is the 11 by 11 'Room' (a garden shed) as is evident from the blurb of the novel quoted above. Room is where he was born and has lived all his life with his Ma and his friends Bed, Wardrobe, Table, and Bath etc. The story explores the life of a child who in the five years of his life has never felt sunshine, rain or grass beneath his feet, never smelled fresh air. He has not known the existence of any other human being other than him, his mother and Old Nick- the man responsible for abducting Ma and continually raping her.

Shortly after his fifth birthday, Ma tells Jack about the existence of a world 'Outside' Room. She tells him the truth behind their life in Room; something that Jack does not quite understand and is only confused and distressed by it all. And no sooner had Jack started convincing himself about 'Outside' than Ma starts planning their escape. However this time he is far from convinced because to him 'Outside' is almost like another planet which can never be visited and where he perhaps would not like to be. On being asked by his mother if he wanted to escape from Room all that Jack has to say is, "Yeah. Only not really." It takes a lot of effort from both Jack and Ma to execute their



‘Great Escape’ which they eventually manage to. It is also about what happens when this tiny world opens up to the wider world after their escape.

The novel that has been inspired from what has been perhaps the most disturbing cases of abduction and illegal imprisonment in the last decade- the Fritzl case, where in 2008, an Austrian man was discovered to have kept his daughter concealed in a secret basement room for twenty four years and with whom he had fathered seven children.

An award winning writer, born in Ireland and living in Canada, Emma Donoghue has often sought real events from the past centuries as inspirations for her novels. However, for *Room*, Donoghue for the first time was inspired by a subject making headlines in the present. Although she has been criticized of ‘sensationalism’ for her source of inspiration, the novel went out to sell 2.5 million copies and to be shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2010 and win the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize in 2011. It is perhaps the huge amount of critical acclaim and the immense popularity of *Room* that calls ones attention to how the most unimaginable situations of life inspire literature, where the one who is writing may not necessarily be the one directly involved but still succeeds in stirring the public’s conscience about the grim realities of the society we live in.

Donoghue acknowledges that the headline about the Fritzls had triggered her to write about a woman who bears a child to her captor and brings him up in the closed world of captivity. However, she also insists that it was not Elizabeth Fritzl that she was more drawn to but the five year old Felix, her youngest son. She was taken over by the idea of a child born in captivity, and raised in secret isolation in the middle of a city, with everything he needs except one of the biggest things- freedom. And perhaps the idea of a child emerging suddenly into the world of which he had heard things but never known it was fully real, inspired her to have this child as the narrator for her novel.

Apart from making it easier for Donoghue to tackle a subject like captivity, her young narrator perfectly captures the malleability of a kid's mind, the way they take what they know and



use it as a filter to interpret the stuff they encounter that they don't understand. Told entirely in the language of the energetic, pragmatic five-year-old Jack, *Room* is at once both easy and difficult to read.

Also, by making Jack the narrator of her novel, Donoghue further complicates the conflicting notions of captivity and freedom. When observed from two different perspectives, that of Jack and that of his mother, Ma, these ideas get completely redefined because here, captivity, freedom, trauma etc all operate at multiple levels and most often the line between them remains largely indistinct. And post their 'Great Escape' this aspect becomes more apparent. For example, Room is both the home and the world for Jack. It is where he and his Ma ate and slept and played and learnt. It is the only world he has ever known and although he would be often be made to sleep in the wardrobe so as to keep him away from any kind of contact of his father, he was not imprisoned in the same way his mother was. Ma on the other hand has known the freedom that is there 'Outside' and therefore to her Room was nothing more than a prison where she had been kept captive for seven long years. And until Jack was born, it was a solitary confinement- broken only by the arrival of the man who came to rape her. She later tries to reason it out with Jack stating, "Yeah, but see, why I was sad-it was *because* of Room"

Herein lay the intricacy of Jack's and Ma's situations. When the tiny world of Jack and his Ma opens to the wider world, it goes all awry. What seemingly feels like freedom to Ma becomes confinement for Jack and vice versa. On one hand Ma shudders at the thought of going back to Room-the place which had been the site of all the pain inflicted upon her by her captor and which had taken away seven precious years of her life, her 'freedom'. Except Jack she would like to have no memories of the place. Jack on the other hand misses Room; he longs to go back to that womb where it was just him and his Ma. He insists, "What I'd like best is to be in Room but I don't think that's in the world". The 'Outside' scares him. It is a place where he has to remember his 'manners', has to be careful of not disturbing a person next door and where he and his Ma cannot share the same bed. When they are finally 'Outside', Ma enjoys her first shower in seven years while Jack yells at the first rain drops on his face, Ma reunites with her friends and family while



Jack finds himself amidst strangers, Ma gets back her favourite walkman while Jack has to struggle to get his favourite Dora bag. When Jack is attracted to a backpack with Dora on it, his uncle tries to persuade his wife into not getting a one that is in pink and suggests that he gets a Spiderman bag instead. This is a peek into the strict gender roles that he has to adhere to in the 'Outside'.

Unfortunately, even Ma's idea of freedom is questioned time and again by the society. After her seven years of captivity when she steps out into a world she realises that it has moved ahead without her, had forgotten and stopped looking for her, and that now sees her as a victim and wants to know all the gory detail of her captivity. One of the most significant episodes in this context is her interview with the Media when she is made to revisit her past and even justify her actions such as keeping Jack alive in such situations.

The interview is a peep into how the world victimises the victim over and over again. Consequently, Ma collapses after the interview. Unable to come to terms with the questions raised on her motherhood, she almost gives up the battle she had been fighting all these years. It is perhaps the realisation that 'freedom' always comes with a price that forces her to take an over dosage of pills. It is the realisation that her new found freedom will always be challenged by the questions the world will keep imposing on her; that she would never be free of her past and it would be perhaps a greater struggle to start life afresh than staying in her captivity.

It is significant that the novel does not end with the escape and almost half the novel focuses on their rehabilitation. Had the novel ended with the 'Great Escape', it would perhaps have been a fantastic novella. By taking it into the aftermath Donoghue shows the horror of the experience, narrating not simply what happens 'Inside', within the four walls of confinement but also what happens next, in the 'Outside', where every day brings along with it a new battle for survival.

The message that Donoghue wants to perhaps drive home through Ma's and Jack's stories is that life is both a journey and a struggle to survive through that journey and we eventually discover whom we choose to survive this journey with. It is Ma's urge to live her life with Jack that helps



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her survive her plightful years of captivity, as well as the difficult days of rehabilitations. It is quite probable that had she not had Jack with her in Room, she would have given up on life. Similarly, in spite of her momentary collapse Ma eventually stands up to face the world with a new found strength which she perhaps derives from none other than her five year old son. As Ma tells her doctor “all those years I was craving company. But now I don’t seem up to it. Most days Jack’s enough for me” (393), in response to which the doctor quotes Emily Dickinson,

“The Soul selects her own Society-Then-shuts the Door-”

Significantly this is heard by Jack. And as for him, it is again his love for his Ma and the desire to survive life’s difficult journey with her that helps him to begin accepting the new life.

Room is thus a celebration of resilience-a story of a mother and son whose love lets them survive the impossible.