



RESEARCH PAPER

**Attachment as a Key in the Development of Personality: A
Psychoanalytical Interpretation of Emma Donoghue's *Room***

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the role of attachment patterns in the development of a child's personality in Emma Donoghue's novel *Room* (2010). The main objective is to observe the personality of a restrained mother, Ma, and her child, Jack, who was born in a confinement, set by a molester, Old Nick. The story revolves around the five years old Jack who became the rescuer of Ma. John Bowlby's Attachment Theory and Jacques Lacan's concept of the development of human consciousness are used to examine the evolution of Jack's personality, keeping in view the pattern of his attachment with Ma. Hence, the novel narrates the depths of maternal love and the persistency of the human spirit. The study concludes on demonstrating the significant role played by the protagonist's attachment to his mother to shape his personality and let him live a normal life in the outside world.

KEYWORDS Attachment, Confinement, Personality Development, Self-Consciousness

Introduction

This study is an analysis of the novel *Room* with a special focus on the attachment pattern and personality development of the protagonist Jack. The outline of *Room* is based on the idea of a woman living in captivity and having a child with her kidnapper and then that imprisoned child's interaction with the outside world. Five years old Jack is the narrator, the protagonist and that captive boy who is detained in a single room with his mother and knows nothing about the world beyond that room. His mother was kidnapped when she was a teenager and was imprisoned in this room by the abductor. With the help of Jack, they both manage to escape from the room. The novel shows Jack's interaction with the outside world and the struggle of him and his mother to live a normal life. Jack's struggle to understand the world and participate in the society is portrayed in a realistic manner.

Attachment stands for deep and stable bond between two people in which those people feel secure and emotionally satisfied. It is defined as a close emotional association between two persons which is characterized by mutual affection and a longing to maintain closeness. John Bowlby rejects the former psychological stance that infants develop attachment with mother because she fulfills their basic needs, rather he states that the infant is attached with mother or caregiver because of their comforting and responsive nature and the response is mostly in the form of touching and playing.

Psychoanalysis claims that a child's first relationship is the key stone in the development of his/her personality. This attachment of a child with his/her mother helps him/her to interact with other people and to make relationships in the society. The nature of a child's relation with his/her mother decides whether a child will be a social or antisocial person. Jacques Lacan (1901-1981)'s work on the development of human personality is the true understanding of Freud's psychoanalysis. He has presented three orders i.e. the Imaginary Order, the Symbolic Order and the Real which, according to him, develop human

unconscious and parent-child relationship. The study shows that the attachment pattern of a child with his/her mother is vital in his/her psychological development and sense of self.

Literature Review

Blackwood (2015) has observed *Room* as a misogynistic exploration of a woman's suffering and compared it with the movie *Crash* (2004) that deplores racism. He explains how the motherhood practices of a woman bring sufferings to her. Keeping *Room* in the view, he critiques that instead of criticizing the abductor who kidnaps and constantly rapes a girl, society criticizes the mother who is confined and who tries her best to nurture her son in best possible ways under extreme circumstances. Blackwood calls *Room* as the 'Crash' of feminism. As *Crash* tells us that we cannot overcome racism by just examining our personal biases, similarly, *Room* makes it clear that hatred for women cannot be removed by such empathetic happenings with women.

Chi (2015) compares *Room* (2010) and *The Boy from the Basement* (2006), and asserts that an attachment figure or a caretaker is needed in the process of a child's healing from a trauma. This comparison is based on the similarity of theme i.e. a young boy living in confinement. Chi observes Jack to have a sophisticated vocabulary although being confined in a single room since his birth. He represents the pure soul uncontaminated by the prejudices of the world. On the other hand, Charlie from *The Boy from the Basement* has a limited vocabulary and does not possess stylistic or language skills as he never came across books and media. Both the characters have physical as well as psychological disabilities due to their childhood confinement.

Das and Singh (2018) explore Jack and Ma's trauma caused due to changing spaces in *Room*. 'Place attachment' to the space and the separation from it causes anxiety, hence, human beings are considered as spatial animals. For Das and Singh, Jack's suffering and anxiety arises because of his unfamiliarity to the outside world and it is not like the space he shared with Ma. He is always confused as he has to maintain his manner and behavior according to the situations he faces in the outside world.

Aisyah and Ayu (2019) focus on Ma's efforts of motherhood in a constrained space. She is confined inside the four walls of a room and her best to bring up her son normally. The study shows how Ma's motherhood is powerless in front of Old Nick as she depends on him for the fulfillment of her child's basic needs. Aisah and Ayu also examine the questions raised on Ma's motherhood, which led her to attempt suicide. She had no choice at the time but she is questioned for keeping Jack with her in imprisonment and even for breastfeeding him till age 5. The particular study brings the fact in light that society should not be given the right to set standards for mothers but mothers themselves need to choose their way of parenting.

Albert (2019) has critiqued the genre of captivity narrative in *Room*. In traditional captivity narratives, children are no more than passive victims. This novel gives perspective to the genre by presenting an innocent five years old as a narrator. Albert remarks that *Room* challenges the basic human values such as security, independence, understanding and kindness. Jack's fascination and amazement towards the ordinary things and actions produces the de-familiarizing effect on literary text. He loves and befriends everything present in the room. This shows his universal benevolence as he expresses his love and openness for all. Jack's trauma in the outside world is more than what he faces in the room because he knows nothing about the outside world and he was content with his life in the room.

Sarah (2019) has explored how physical confinement of Ma and Jack leads to their psychological confinement as well. She emphasizes how social isolation for a long time leads to lack of self-identity, feelings of incompleteness and decline in physical as well as mental health. A person's self is linked to social structure and it arises in social experience. When

Ma and Jack come out of the room, it can be seen that Ma faces difficulty in being a mother and to be herself at the same time. Ma gets disconnected with her former self as she is unable to return to her normal life and it seems that she has internalized confinement. Similarly, Jack finds it difficult to admit himself as a separate entity from Ma. These are the psychological challenges faced by Ma and Jack due to their physical confinement. Sarah's Masters Dissertation is unpublished yet.

Drastichová (2020) discusses the language and narrative style of *Room*, and identifies Jack's personification for everything present in the room. It is shown through the capitalization of the objects' names when Jack pronounces them. Drastichová observes that Jack assigns gender to every single thing around him. He gives masculine gender to the things with which he used to play (like jeep, mouse etc.) and feminine gender to the things that provides him comfort (like wardrobe, rug, skylight etc.). Jack uses creative metaphors and recall things with their sound. He also faces difficulty with irregular verbs and comparatives. Emma Donoghue has used Jack's narration as a way to show the world from a different and unusual frame.

Sreelekshmi (2021) has examined the modernist and postmodernist perspectives in *Room* by creating a contrast in the characters of Ma and Jack respectively. Sreelekshmi comments that Ma is a modernist who laments the fragmentation and focuses on the tragedies of life. She is always longing for a universal life which has unity and organization in it. Meanwhile, Jack on the other hand, represents the perspective of a postmodernist who celebrates fragmentation and imperfections in life. He does not care about the universality or finality of life rather he enjoys the life as it is. She makes her point by subjecting that postmodernism blurs the boundary between the real and virtual. And same is the case with Jack who is always confused and considers cartoons and fictional characters his friends.

Topbaş (2021) compares rape trauma of Ma in Emma Donoghue's *Room* with the rape trauma of Meryem in Ö. Zülfi Livaneli's *Bliss*, with reference to the trauma theory of Cathy Caruth. According to the theory, trauma is ungraspable at the time of actual traumatic happening and is only reclaimed after a latency period. Ma and Meryem both are kept confined for a certain period of time and exhibit the symptoms of trauma inside and outside the captivity. Topbaş examined how Ma's traumatic happening is re-experienced by her in the face of societal judgments after her escape from the confinement and it resulted in her attempt to suicide. While Meryem, on the other hand, re-experiences her trauma in the form of nightmares and hallucinations. He explored the possibility of their individual recovery, and stated that Meryem is more likely to fully recover but Ma experiences a delay in recovery due to the societal pressure. Both the characters are victims of their cultural norms and the patriarchal society. *Room* portrays inhuman behavior of society and media towards the rape victim as the reason of rape trauma. *Bliss* shows patriarchal society and its culture of silencing rape victims as the main cause of rape trauma.

The brief review of literature presented here establishes the context and the ample justification for the present study. The brief review of literature presented here establishes the context and the ample justification for the present study.

Theoretical Framework

Lacanian psychoanalysis and Bowlby's attachment theory is applied to carry out this research. Attachment Theory is the combined work of John Bowlby (1907-1990) and Mary Ainsworth (1913-1999). According to the Attachment Theory, a child has an innate ability to form attachment with one of the main figures (i.e. a mother or a caregiver) and this is called monotropy. The relationship of a child with the caregiver is the basis on which he explores the world. There are four patterns or styles of attachment given by Mary Ainsworth as a result of her strange situation experiment:

Secure Attachment: these children look forward towards others as supportive and helpful individuals and are confident at making social interactions, Anxious-Avoidant Attachment: children show an aggressive, stressful and antisocial behavior, Anxious-Resistant Attachment: these children lack self-confidence and are resistant in making friends thus are inclined towards social isolation, and Disorganized Attachment in which the children see others as a threat and shows destructive behavior.

Lacan gave different stages or orders of the development of child's unconscious. In Mirror Stage, the infant becomes identified with his/her mirror image and the mental illustration of 'I' is created. The child sees himself/herself as a whole. The Imaginary Order is the world of pleasure and wholeness as the child thinks that 'my mother is all I need and I am all my mother needs.' The infant is in a complete union with his/her mother and the stage continues till the child acquires language. The Symbolic Order is the world of language, gender roles, societal norms and ideologies. The child is now separated from his/her mother i.e. the mother-child union is broken. For the entire life, the child wants to get the union back with his/her mother which is referred as objet petit a. It is the lost object of desire of an individual.

The theories of Lacan and Bowlby both emphasize the early relationship of mother and infant since this relationship is significant in child's psychological development. Lacan's theory focuses on the sense of self developed by an infant called 'mirror stage', which is developed by child's relationship with the mother, similarly Bowlby focuses on the importance of attachment formed in early childhood for social and psychological development. Lacan's psychoanalysis stresses the unconscious desires of human being while Bowlby's theory highlights the conscious process of attachment and social bonding, equally giving importance to the role of unconscious motivations in shaping attachment patterns. Lacan suggests that language is a symbolic system that helps child to be a part of the society. Language also plays role in developing attachment bonds because communicating the needs and emotions to the caregiver helps in forming secure mother-child attachment. Although the theories of Lacan and Bowlby differ in many aspects still they intersect in the areas of early relationships, the role of language and the importance of unconscious processes.

Material and Methods

The present study is based upon the descriptive analysis of *Room* in the light of Attachment theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Results and Discussion

Attachment Pattern and Sense of Self in *Room*

The novel *Room* (2010) is the story of an indestructible unique bond between a mother and a child. The novel narrates how love and strong relationships help in facing the challenging circumstances. Being the victim of a confinement, Ma is the only relation that Jack has seen in his life. Living twenty-four hours a day together, Jack does not know what separation from mother feels like. His knowledge about the outside world is limited to his Ma and the television which makes him a resilient child.

Pattern of attachment with their mothers varies from children to children. Based on mother's sensitivity towards her child, these attachment patterns are developed in the early childhood. Considering different attachment patterns, children with anxious-avoidant pattern are unemotional towards their parents when reunited after separation. The same pattern can be observed in Jack as he remains confused and angry towards Ma when he is taught about the reality of the outside world. "I'm confused already, I'm one hundred percent confused" (Donoghue 151).

On the other hand, Ma tries her best to create a safe space because she wants Jack to grow up like a normal child. Due to lack of supplements by Old Nick, Ma is forced to breastfeed Jack even when he is five. She tries her best to utilize the available space in the room so that Jack can play, read and have fun. These are the things that make their relationship unique. So as soon as, Jack escapes the room, he is hit by the separation anxiety from his mother.

According to Lacan, the self of an individual is built through identification with others, especially the mother. In *Room*, Jack's entire identity and sense of self is developed by Ma. Their interaction might be helpful in his social and psychological development. He keeps her bad tooth with him, during their great escape, unconsciously substituting for Ma's presence.

Jack sees himself in a complete union with Ma. He is in the Imaginary Order as defined by Lacan. The Imaginary Order is a stage of completeness and delight for a child. At this stage, the child thinks that he just needs his mother and his mother also only needs him. The world seems complete to him. Same is the case with Jack. The Imaginary Order is the world of images which is created in Jack's mind through his interaction with Ma. Due to his unusual attachment with Ma, he develops a sense of belongingness to her which ultimately leads him to identity crisis. Jack is unaware of the fact that he and his Ma can have separate things and identity.

As soon as the Imaginary Order ends, separation anxiety is the first feeling that a child experiences in his life. Jack faces this anxiety twice. It is the worst nightmare for Jack to be separated from Ma. While talking about punishment that Old Nick can potentially give to them, the greatest punishment for Jack is not the shortage of food or warmth in the room but to be separated from Ma. "I thought he was going to punish us too. I try to imagine. Like if there were two Rooms, if he put me in one and you in the other one" (Donoghue 99).

This is what makes Jack anxious on his separation from Ma. Many psychoanalysts affirm that, the greater the level of attachment, the higher is the level of anxiety on separation. Firstly, Jack is threatened and anxious at the time of escape. He needs Ma with him because he is fearful of the strange situation and unknown people.

For the second time, Jack faces the same feeling when Ma attempts suicide and is shifted to the hospital. He stays with his grandparents. Anxious-avoidant attachment is observed in Jack as he learns to live without his mother. Jack becomes attached with his uncle and grandma. They go on shopping and lunch and do stuff together. It is due to the absence of his mother that he creates relationships with other people. When Ma returns home, he greets her but does not become emotional on their reunion. It proves that by the time, Jack has become less dependent on her. He keeps behaving normal with his grandma even after the return of Ma.

Their former mother-child relationship is also affected when Ma decides to live independently. She decides to keep separate rooms for Jack and herself. She is trying to create a boundary between herself and Jack so that Jack can learn to live like a normal child and forget about their life in the room.

Jack's Reluctance to Leave Confinement

Extrinsic motivation is the motivation that comes from the outside source while intrinsic motivation comes from the inside of an individual. Jack lacks intrinsic motivation to leave the room. In his case, the motivation is extrinsic. He has a pessimistic approach regarding his mother's plan. He tries his best to convince her and keeps saying that it is a bad idea to leave the room. One reason is that he does not think that the room is a prison. For him, that room is the only home he ever has.

Another reason for Jack's reluctance to leave the room is that he is afraid of losing his bond with Ma. Even at the age of five, he is unconsciously in Lacanian Imaginary Order and does not want to step out of it. It is difficult for him to think that Ma has other relationships besides Jack in the outside world. He simply does not want to lose Ma's attention neither he wants to share it with other people. Jack unconsciously wants to be the only need of his mother.

Jack is disturbed by the thought that in the outside world, people have the same name as his. This is how identity crisis arises in his mind. After their escape, Jack is still confused and uncomfortable as he has seen the outside world. "I've seen the world and I'm tired now" (Donoghue 193). He is confused, afraid and sleepy when Ma and Jack are in the police station and Ma is being interviewed. This is the first place where Jack goes after their escape.

Freedom may have some other meanings in the mind of Jack and the outside world is not giving him complete freedom that he desires. Everything for Jack changes as soon as they step out of their room. He is unable to understand why Ma is behaving strangely, why she is throwing his clothes in the dustbin which he likes a lot, "Ma said we'd be free but this doesn't feel like free" (Donoghue 320). Ma is also telling him that they both are not bound to follow any rules and routine like they did in the room. They can do whatever they want, and at any time. Jack finds this strange because he is habitual of a fixed routine and cannot carry on without any rules. He starts missing his room more.

Their mother-son bond is largely affected as they leave the room. The outside world, its people, the rules, everything is different from that of the room. The room was a whole world of Ma and Jack. As soon as they step out of the room, Jack is supposed to learn manners in order to talk to others even to his Ma. He has to follow an entirely new routine. Ma remains busy in talking to the doctor, lawyers, her family, the police officers, media etc. Jack is disturbed by all this. This is the reason he does not like the outside world and wants to go back in his room where Ma was always available for him.

Jack lacks any sense of belonging to the outside world. They had to live according to other people. This is the reason Jack was reluctant to escape the room. He made his entire effort to convince Ma but Ma wanted a good and safe childhood for Jack. So they left the room. Jack does not like it initially. "Maybe I'm a human but I'm a me-and-Ma as well. I don't know a word for us two. Roomers?" (Donoghue 342). He is facing identity crisis in the world. He misses his room and wants to go back but after sometime, he starts accepting the changes of the outside world.

Challenges Jack Encounters in the Outside World

One of the difficulties Jack faces, as soon as he left the room, is his inability to communicate with people. This was because Jack has never talked to any other person except Ma. His communication skills are not good. He uses some words and sentences in his talks that only Ma can understand. Thinking about this, Ma writes a note and gives it to Jack to ask for help from the first person he meets outside. After a few hours of leaving the room and rescuing Ma, Jack gets tired of the world and wants to go back to room. He is feeling uncomfortable for not sleeping in the room. This is the initial conflict he faces in the outside world.

Security is of chief importance in a child's development. Room is the place which is a prison for them but Jack feels secure there. He has developed place attachment to the room which defines his existence. As soon as he steps out of the room, he loses his origin. The sudden detachment from his room is also traumatic for him. He has entered a world about which he knew nothing. "In Room I was safe, and Outside is the scary" (Donoghue 273).

Jack faces a huge difficulty in understanding the concept of the outside world mainly because he has no prior knowledge about the world and only verbal explanation from Ma does not prove enough for him to understand everything.

In room, Jack is in complete unity with Ma. When Jack comes outside, he experiences greater signs of individuality. Gradually he comes to know that Ma and he are two separate individuals who can do things alone.

Social adjustment is another challenge faced by Jack in the outside world. He faces difficulties in being social and learning about relationships. His relationship with his Ma is like the relationship of a newborn or toddler with his/her mother. He is still living in Lacan's 'Imaginary Order' and wants to be identified with someone in the world i.e. his Ma.

Jack seems to suffer from social anxiety disorder. It is signified by having fear in social situations and disability to function properly in daily life. Confinement is the reason that he is unable to move into the 'Symbolic Order' which would help him in coping with the world because he longs to be identified with his mother. He gradually learns to be with his grandma and do activities with her but being comfortable with new people and to make new friends requires time.

As his knowledge about the world and the room shatters, Jack feels difficulty in distinguishing between real and imaginary. His concept of the world, real and imaginary has turned upside down. In confinement, Ma has told him that only Ma and Jack are real, other things or people they see in the TV are imaginary. So as soon as Jack escaped the room, he is confused between his existence and reality. "I am not in room. Am I still me?" (Donoghue 172). This shows his loss of self in the outside world.

Apart from mental and social issues, Jack also has physical issues as a result of growing up in confinement. He faces the issues of immunity, social adjustment, sensory modulation, and spatial perception. Jack has not experienced an area bigger than 11 square feet. When he comes out of the room, he is unable to perceive the space properly. He doesn't know how to keep distance. He keeps banging in things as he walks. It is like he has emerged from the womb i.e. a smaller space into the world which is a much larger space. He has also not been in direct sunlight for his life of five years. For Jack, the daylight is always so bright that he screams upon seeing it.

Jack is not habitual of listening to too many voices at a time. He urges to put fingers in his ears when the people talk. For him, sounds are abrupt and can happen anytime leaving him scared. He defines some sounds as tiny and some loud enough to hurt his head. Jack's eyes are not used to look far away. His eye muscles need to be stretched out from the window. The wind also feels so harsh to him that he thinks it would rip him. Jack does not feel good in the natural environment.

The novel suggests that stepping out of one's comfort zone helps in personal growth and development. When he visits the room for the last time, it seems small and empty to him. This shows that he has now accepted the vastness of the world. Actually the room has not shrunk but his perception has become broad.

Jack lacks perception about physical boundaries and bodies. While he is in a coffee shop with his grandma, he knocks down a child just trying to hug him. He just wants to show his love for that child. Later on grandma told him that he cannot hug the strangers in order to show love. The outside world is unable to gain Jack's acceptance at first but gradually he embraced the change.

Significance of Motherly Love in Keeping Jack Secure

While spending several years of her life in forced confinement, the only person she has to love and take care of is Jack, her son, who is so close and dear to her. Although he is the son of the captor, but Ma says that he is only her son and loves him unconditionally. He is the only purpose of her life and she takes various measures in the room as well as in the outside world to keep Jack secure.

Lacanian psychoanalysis tells us that the mother-child relationship is important in the development of child's self and identity. In Lacan's 'Mirror Stage', a child first imitates what he sees, usually the mother. This recognition carries a thoughtful impact on the child's formation of his/her identity and sense of self. Jack develops his identity in relation with his mother. While being in the confinement, Ma does not tell Jack that they are prisoners in the room. She does not want Jack to think of himself as a victim but she wants Jack to flourish and see the world in an enchanted way. This shows her love and protection for her son.

Since the birth of Jack, she has hid him from the eyes of Old Nick. She makes Jack sleep in the wardrobe so that Old Nick does not even have a glance of him. It is her love for Jack that she wants to take him out of the room. She understands that Jack's growing body and mind needs best nutrition and a clear understanding of the world which are not possible in the room. So she dares to take the risk. Ma becomes extremely frustrated when Dr. Clay ask for Jack's checkup for any sexual abuse. Nothing like what doctors are thinking, has happened to him and "All these years, I kept him safe" (Donoghue 207). Perhaps Jack's protection is the only thing she has done with full effort in the imprisonment.

Despite her pathetic living conditions, Ma is questioned by the society about her motherhood choices. During her interview, the interviewer wants to know that why she chose to keep Jack with her in confinement rather than requesting the captor to give him to another family so that he may get a normal childhood. For this, Ma replies that Jack's presence with his mother is more than that, whether the society calls it a normal childhood or not. People also question Ma's choice of breastfeeding Jack as he was old enough for this. She breastfeeds him to give him best nutrition in confinement. This is an act of pure love, care and protection from Ma but it is not seen as a commendable act by the people. It goes to the extent that she commits suicide.

It is her love for Jack that forces her to be peaceful with her captor. "I'll be there in your head" (Donoghue 165). Ma utters this to Jack when he is to act upon their plan of great escape. This shows the intimacy of the mother and son. She doesn't want Jack to become a public person so she strictly forbids media to capture Jack's photographs. Through every possible way, she wants to keep Jack safe from the Old Nick as well as the judgmental society.

In the room where Jack was in Lacan's Imaginary Order, Ma remains like a non-separable entity with her son. After their escape, when Jack has entered the Symbolic Order, Ma is making him learn to live in separate room like other children but is available for him all the time. It is their mutual love and strong bonding that they survived in the room as well as in the outside world. Jack becomes Ma's savior in the room and takes her out of her imprisonment. Ma protects him from Old Nick even by offering her body to distract him from Jack. But the outside world changes the nature of Ma and Jack's relationship. Jack now understands that he and Ma are separate individuals and can have different things now. Both are finally free.

Conclusion

The conclusion is a crystallization of the main findings of this study. This exploration has shown that Emma Donoghue weaves a narrative that explores the depths of maternal love and the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity. Through the confinement of Jack and Ma within a single room, the novel delves into themes of attachment, identity

formation, and the struggle for freedom. As they navigate the challenges of reintegrating into society, Jack's reluctance to leave the comfort of their confinement reflects the profound impact of their bond and the fear of losing their connection in the outside world. The unique attachment pattern between Jack and Ma, characterized by anxious-avoidant behavior, serves as the backdrop for their journey of survival and eventual liberation.

The transition of the Jack's character from confinement to the outside world is a journey towards living in Lacan's Symbolic Order, guided by the principles of freedom, authenticity, social interaction, existential anxiety, meaning creation, and the acceptance of uncertainty. It became difficult for him to leave the Imaginary Order and enter the Symbolic Order. His ability to find peace in this new world depends on his capacity to overcome these challenges. To sum up, through Jack and Ma's journey, their ability to live peacefully in the outside world can be understood in terms of their gradual adaptation to Lacan's Symbolic Order and the attachment pattern. It reflects their exclusive reliance on each other for psychological support and security.

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