

## **Trapped in Time: The Psychological Toll of Captivity in Emma Donoghue's *Room***

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### **Abstract**

Captivity refers to the state of being confined or imprisoned, where individuals are restricted in their freedom of movement. This includes situations such as incarceration in prisons, detention during war time, human trafficking and other forms of involuntary confinement. Human captivity can be enforced by legal systems or through coercive means. The most apparent feature is physical confinement within a limited space, which can vary significantly in size and quality depending on the context. Individuals in captivity often experience a lack of control over their environment and daily activities. This loss of autonomy can lead to psychological stress and behavioural changes. This paper explores the trauma of the character of Ma in Emma Donoghue's *Room*. The objective of this paper is to analyse Ma's journey of traumatic recovery, considering the various factors that cause her trauma and hinder her recovery as well as the factors that help her cope with trauma and contribute to her recovery.

**Keywords:** Confinement, Trauma, Sexual abuse, Incarceration.

Literature has been defined as a body of writings that possesses aesthetic excellence and conveys ideas of permanent or universal interest. Literature can be categorised into several forms, Poetry, Prose, Drama and Essays. It serves multiple functions in society: it can entertain, inform, preserve culture and critique social norms. It also includes oral traditions that have been transcribed over time. It often explores universal themes and ideas, such as love, loss, identity, morality and human condition.

It provides insights into the culture, history and values of a particular time and place. English literature encompasses a vast body of written works produced in the English language, originating from the British Isles and extending to various parts of the world influenced by English culture.

Captivity is unique compared to other traumatic experiences because it involves prolonged exposure to distressing conditions without an end in sight. Victims are often entirely dependent on their captors for basic needs such as food, water and safety. This dependency creates a sense of helplessness and despair, which can severely impact

mental health. Research indicates that the psychological consequences of captivity can manifest as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety disorders, depression and other emotional disturbances. Studies have shown that the effects of captivity can persist for decades after release. Survivors may experience flashbacks, nightmare and severe anxiety when reminded of their traumatic experiences. Additionally, they may struggle with trust issues and difficulties in forming relationships due to the betrayal experienced during captivity. The chronic nature of these psychological effects underscores the importance of recognising them as serious public health concerns.

Emma Donoghue 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, the regional prize (Caribbean and Canada) in 2011.

Donoghue's portrayal of Ma's experience highlights not only the physical aspects of captivity but also the profound psychological impact it has on both her and Jack. The isolation they endure creates a unique dynamic where Ma must create a nurturing environment within an oppressive space, showcasing her strength as a mother despite overwhelming circumstances. The effects of isolation are vividly depicted through Jack's perspective, which serves as both a lens for understanding trauma and a means to convey innocence amidst horror. His limited worldview shaped entirely by his life in the room reflects how trauma can distort reality for victims. According to Herman, "Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life" (24). The narrative emphasises how Jack's development is influenced by his mother's efforts to provide him with love and education despite their dire situation.

The novel starts with Ma preparing for Jack's fifth birthday. Therefore, at the age of five, he is very susceptible to internalising any traumatic experience. The timing of place detachment is potentially suitable to cause trauma in Jack. The children are much more vulnerable to traumatic experiences since trauma does not change the child's personality (as for adults); rather, it forms his personality. This is due to brain

development in early childhood. Jack could not develop the sense of privacy since his self was merged with that of Ma and the room. Jack, Ma and the room were three components of Jack's self, so he could not distinguish between self and the other. On the other hand, spatial properties of his birthplace did not allow him to distinguish between boundaries. A traumatising experience is usually magnified in its effect for a child victim and leaves him helpless and vulnerable. A child who has experienced trauma may create a magical guardian to communicate and ask for protection. Once Jack is cut off from the room and from Ma, he holds her tooth in his mouth as a magical defender. "I suck on Tooth that's Ma, a bit of her" (320). Jack sucks on Ma's tooth even when Ma isn't around to breastfeed him.

Psychological violence includes mental, emotional and verbal abuse. It is said in Emma Donoghue's *Room* that Ma confronted new conditions that she had never imagined before. Ma was nineteen when she was kidnapped and like any innocent girl oblivious to a stranger's main intention, Ma easily believes what Old Nick says and rushes to examine the dog's status. The man used the dog as an object to capture Ma's attention and feelings:

"Anyway—this man ran up asking for help, his dog was having a fit and he thought it might be dying."

"What's he called?" "The man?"

I shake my head. "The dog."

"No, the dog was just a trick to get me into his pickup truck. Old Nick's truck." (116-117)

The conversation shows Ma explaining to her son why she was trapped in the room. It is clear that Ma wants to help the dog, but trusting a man whom she has never met makes her life miserable. Ma believes anyone, whether they are telling the truth or not. Unfortunately, Ma falls into a trap and is locked in a room for nearly two years with no one to care for her. The man comes to give her food, vitamins and clothes.

Ma cannot reject the man in this state since despair and tension cloud her thoughts. She tries not to whine about what has happened to her. A year has passed and Ma still refuses to see the man's face or communicate with him. In her heart, her only desire is to get out of the room. Nightmares and anxiety torture Ma for a few months until she can accept her new condition, even though she desperately wants to escape it deep down. Staying in the room denies her the freedom other people enjoy, which

diminishes her wonderful days: “Old Nick--I didn’t even know him, I was nineteen. He stole me” (116). Ma is nineteen years old when an unknown person takes her. She tries to flee before the stranger drags her away to an unknown location, but nothing she does helps. The room is fortified with a security system code and only the man who knows the password may supply Ma with food and vitamins. Even though Ma has all her daily needs met, she is nonetheless depressed because she has no one to talk to and this is the first time she has been kidnapped.

Jack has only ever seen one other person besides his mom and that is Old Nick. Old Nick visits the room at night time while young Jack sleeps in a wardrobe, hidden as much as he can be. Old Nick brings food and necessities to the room, but poor young Jack is unaware that Old Nick kidnapped Ma when she was nineteen years old and he has kept her imprisoned for the past seven years. Old Nick regularly rapes Ma each night and Jack is the product of one such sexual assault. Before Jack was born, she suffered a miscarriage. She attempts to escape twice by smashing a toilet lid over Old Nick’s head, but he catches her and breaks her wrist. During a visit, Old Nick calls out for Jack in front of the wardrobe and asks 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?” (90). Then Ma diverts him by inviting him to the bed. Ma deliberately acts with an emotional bond with the captor for survival.

Ma experiences sleep disturbance. The statement, “I couldn’t sleep without pills” (235), strengthens that Ma has to take sleeping pills before sleep so that she can sleep. Difficulty in to sleep is a signal of stress and worry. On the other hand, there are some depressive conditions in which sleep is increased. It can be seen in the quotation, “I used to be scared to go to sleep, in case he came back,” states Ma, “but when I was asleep was the only time I wasn’t crying, so I slept about sixteen hours a day” (118). The quotation authenticates that it is not only difficult for the victims of depression to sleep, but it can also increase their sleep duration.

Ma suffered from emotional and mental anguish for a long time after being abducted for seven years. She must handle the circumstance and observe Old Nick’s behaviour to figure out how to leave the room. She swears to keep Jack safe from Old Nick since the day he was born. Ma had to have sex with Old Nick practically every day when he got into the room at 9.00 p.m. She cannot fight the man until she has a son. Despite having one, she is still forced to do it. Jack observes: “I don’t think he came last night after nine, the air’s always different if he came. I don’t ask because she doesn’t

like saying about him” (4). Ma is in a completely different scenario. Despite having a partner to converse with, Ma’s psychological health did not improve. She cannot defend herself while also complying with the man’s demands. Ma is unable to refuse Old Nick’s request for sex since it has been ingrained in her. This proves that instead of putting herself in danger, Ma always obeys and submits to the man. Foucault asserts that “normalisation is one of the great instruments of power” (184). Old Nick normalizes his food timetable by conditioning Ma and Jack to expect food at specific times. Moreover, by consistently employing the same punishment of depriving them of food and electricity, he problematically normalizes his punitive methods.

Ma tries hard to force her son to run away from the place where they are treated like prisoners. Jack, a boy who has just turned five, is strongly encouraged by his mother to learn to run away. All of this is done by Ma for their own good. Jack attempts to keep in his mind what Ma has said so that he can get out of the room. Eric D. Lister notes that “When one is physically vulnerable, fearing further violence or death, this forced silence necessarily shapes subsequent reaction to the trauma” (872). However, because their effort to escape does not go smoothly as Ma predicted, it causes huge trauma for Jack. Even though it does not go smoothly, in the end, Jack manages to bring himself and Ma free from the room they have been living in. He says:

....Oh, I have to Wiggle Out, I was forgetting. I start to do like a snake, But Rug’s got tighter I don’t know how, I’m stuck I’m stuck. Ma Ma Ma... I can’t get out like we practiced even though we practiced and Practiced, it’s all gone wrong, sorry. Old Nick’s going to take me to a Place and bury me and the worms crawl in the worms crawl out... I’m Crying again, my nose is running, my arms are knotted under my chest, I’m fighting Rug because she’s not my friend anymore. I’m kicking like Karate but she’s got me, she’s the shroud for the corpses to fall in the Sea.... (172-73)

With the above point in mind, the process of escaping is not as smooth as Ma and Jack had imagined. The process makes Jack very depressed and scared. He is afraid that Old Nick will bury him and he is also scared that Ma will be disappointed with him. Although in the end he succeeds, still the course of incident seems terrible for his mind. He finds it hard to forget the way he managed to escape.

Jack and Ma lived together for an unpredictable time and Ma tried as hard as possible to educate Jack until Jack was five years old. As long as they become captives in

the narrow room, it makes them unknown to the world outside of the room. However, there are a lot of things he can find. Therefore, when he manages to get out of that narrow room that has already become the centre of his life, he is confused, afraid of the crowd and traumatised wondering if one day he will return to that cramped place again.

Ma and Jack acclimate and adapt to their changing contexts. Theirs is a mutually dependent and nourishing relationship that provides strength to each other. Andrea O'Reilly in her article entitled "All Those Years I Kept Him Safe: Maternal practice as Redemption and Resistance in Emma Donoghue's *Room*" states: "the birth of Jack gives purpose to Ma's life in room and enables her to endure captivity through his love and their companionship" (95). Early on, Ma gives Jack the mantra of "Mind over Matter". She tells him, "If we don't mind, it doesn't matter" (11). Over the years, it has been suggested that mind over matter is an essential part of healthy living. Jack and Ma are on the outside; they need to really define who they are and what they hope to become. They will have to change to reinvent or reincarnate themselves; day by day, event by event.

Posttraumatic stress disorder is a mental disorder that can develop after a person is exposed to a traumatic event, such as sexual assault, warfare, traffic collisions, or other threats on a person's life. According to Cathy Caruth, "the precise definition of post-traumatic stress disorder is contested, most descriptions generally agree that there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience" (4). Jack's success in escaping from Old Nick, causes enormous trauma. Nevertheless, the escape process he experiences does not run smoothly. Even after knowing the outside world, Jack still feels comfortable in that room, but, he does not want to go back there. However, there is fear for Jack if one day he and his mother would return to that small room again.

Post-escape, inside the hospital, after his first night, when he wakes up in a room full of natural sunlight, he notices that he has wet the bed and apologises to Ma. For a child who has suffered trauma or is scared or has had nightmares, bedwetting is a sign of their mental anguish. This nocturnal enuresis clearly indicates the anxiety and immense stress felt by him in the outside world. He not only had to get accustomed to the idea that the outside world is a lot bigger than he had been told about, but also that, they would never return to the room again. From a child's perspective, he feels that it is a temporary displacement and longs to go back to familiar surroundings. Similarly, Ma feels

disconnected from her surroundings because her childhood home and the relations within that space have changed so much in the seven years that she had been gone. This feeling of dissociation is often reported by survivors of sexual violence, wherein the person experiences detachment from their surroundings, depersonalisation and lessened reactivity. She views her incarceration in a different light than before, as she feels that life has moved on for everybody in a positive direction apart from hers. She grapples with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a negative sense of identity with reduced self-esteem and efficacy, in her former safe haven. She also lashes out at her mother Nancy and blames her for teaching her to be good to strangers, which resulted in her incarceration by Old Nick.

Ma's traumatic experiences also affect her relationship with her parents. Her parents thought that she had died and had even organised a funeral service for her. She also comes to find that her mother and father have moved on in their lives – they have separated and her mother has found a new partner. Ma is not happy about this, as she acts cold towards Leo, her mother's new partner. Furthermore, when Ma's father flies in from Australia to visit her, he is unable to accept Jack as his grandson, because, in his eyes, Jack is a product of her daughter's repeated rape. When Ma first tries to introduce her father and Jack to each other, Ma's father does not want to talk to Jack or even be in the same room, saying, "But all I can think of is that beast and what he" (282). Ma is extremely frustrated by his inability to accept his grandson and it creates tension between them.

Unfortunately, Ma can't run away from her past the way she wants to. She tries to take a bunch of pills to kill herself, but she survives. While recuperating, she's absent for a whole part of the novel. Jack proves to her that she can't move on without seeing the room again one more time. He suggests to see it and she agrees to go with him because she feels she needs to see it and accept it before she can move on. And just as Jack always relied on her, she has to learn to rely on him a bit, too. *Room* powerfully illustrates that trauma is not merely an individual experience but a multifaced phenomenon that affects relationships, societal perceptions and personal identities. Through its vivid portrayal of Ma's struggles alongside Jack's innocent perspective, the novel suggests that while trauma leaves indelible marks on individuals, there exists hope for healing through connection, love and understanding.

This research paper attempts to examine the multifaced influence that confinement can exert on individuals. It is also observed that, isolation from human

connection transforms the individual's identity, perception of freedom and society, as well as some fundamental concepts, such as reality and normalcy. The individual experiences a kind of psychological and social paralysis as soon as he moved to live once again in the free community.

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