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THE BEATEN PSYCHE- GENDER DOMINATION AND DIFFERENCES IN EMMA DONOGHUE'S ROOM

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Out of the numerous definitions on gender the one common aspect is the focus on the inequalities between males and females. Gender differences often show women and girls in weaker positions in social, cultural, political, economic and physical issues. Inequalities between men and women is a serious issue that demands attention. The breeding ground for this issue is nothing but the constructions of gender itself. History is constructed around men and their achievements. Power and positions have been invested on men and many cultures associate them with strength and project them as agents of protection while women are constructed as dependants who require protection. The tradition continues and men are the leaders in most of the countries characterised by different forms of insecurities like war, destruction, and poverty. What is the role of a woman in this scenario? Most of the cultures assign her the position of a mother. She is given more attention when she gives birth to a male child. Women have been viewed only as child bearers and rearers. Patriarchal domination and control has reduced women to part of the male's possessions. Male control over a woman's sexual and reproductive rights has denied her freedom and has made her a victim of gender-targeted forms of violence like rape, prostitution, pornography and much more. Objectification of women has robbed her of her dignity and right to survive as a gender.

This paper aims at providing an insight into Emma Donoghue's *Room* a novel that can be viewed as a, "... life-affirming fable of mother- child love and its triumph." (Rose 30). Captivity and its impact on the psyche on the person has always been a theme of fascination in fiction. Reality bites the readers in rare cases. *Room* is one such book that hits hard and keeps haunting the readers. There are people who have spent major portions of their lives or at times even their entirety in captivity. The bitter reality is that it is women who get trapped. The torture room into which they are pushed becomes their home for decades. Several cases of this sort has been reported. The one that inspired the writer was that of Elisabeth Fritzl. Confined in the basement of her own house and alarmingly by her father for 24 years harassed physically and sexually thereby giving birth to seven children shocked the entire world. *Room* brings out the plight of a teenager held captive by an elderly man in a soundproof shed for seven years. She is sexually assaulted and gives birth to two children of which one dies few days after birth and the other, a boy survives.

One gender takes for granted the biological weakness of another and assaults her. The beaten psyche of the woman is all trying to bring up the child in the best possible manner. Can there be a better example of the display of courage, endurance and above all the celebration of motherhood that the character of Emma Donoghue, maa exhibits? However the fact that the mother and son have not stepped out of the room for seven years and that the child has not seen the outside world is disturbing and provokes the questioning of injustice done to the lives of these innocent souls.

Room is narrated not by the woman held as captive but by the child because the room he lives in is his world. The wardrobe where he sleeps when Old Nick comes, the rug with the stains of his birth, the Meltedy spoon and the television which picturises real world that Jack does not understand is all that the mother and

son live with. Ma takes utmost care to keep her son interested and educates him in the cramped confinement. As Harleen Singh in his essay, "Beyond the Tragic" calls it, "...a testament to the inventive and self-preservationist ethos of the human spirit" (10).

The joy and happiness the child brought into the life of Ma cannot push aside the crude realities of her existence. At the age of nineteen she was abducted by a total stranger trying to seek help to save his dying dog. She was brought to this shed- a room and from the onwards was sexually assaulted, beaten and starved. All means of escape has proved tragic. Her efforts to hurt him and threaten failed. The strategy has to be different she understood if not, "...he'd go away and I get hungrier and hungrier till I die." (*Room 121*)

Seven years in a person's life, shut off completely from the outside world is the worst kind of torture any woman can experience. As Ma says, she could not do anything but cry and cry except for the time she slept. "I used to be scared to go to sleep in case he came back....but when I was asleep was the only time I wasn't crying, so I slept about sixteen hours a day"(118).

Old Nick as named by Ma and Jack is a psychopath. His visits were to rape Ma and to bring few things to keep them alive. Jack hid himself in the wardrobe at night when Old Nick came. There was no kind of communication between the child and him. Ma was so scared that he would harm the child and she never allowed him anywhere near Jack.

The book presents Ma as a sexually abused woman for seven years but she is portrayed as a courageous and interesting character who is not groaning and mourning her plight but encounters it with positivity and tries to teach her child from all that is around them in the room. Through motherhood she gains mental strength and the bond she shares with Jack paves way for an interesting insight into gender identities especially in the case of Jack. Jack's extreme circumstances in the early stages of his life keeps him in a state of intense attachment to his mother. At seven years of age he takes some breast milk before going to bed. Jack himself explains:

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 hers. Also when I tell her what I'm thinking and she tells me what she's thinking, our each ideas jump into our other's head, like colouring blue crayon on top of yellow that makes green. (12)

Jack is not at all aware of the boundaries between him and his Ma. Describing their day to day activities, Jack says that he would rest on his Ma during his bath listening to the "bang of her heart" (18). As Dillu Mary Rose, in the essay, "Rereading Lacan: Towards an Alternative semiotics in Emma Donoghue's *Room*" "says,"... the notion of the Imaginary, a pre-Oedipal stage in while the child has not yet differentiated itself from the mother..." The imaginary stage of Lacan, is seen in Jack as he considers himself as an inseparable part of his mother. He goes to the extent of dreaming and becoming bigger and bigger till he turns into "a woman with a W" (16). Jack finds unity and fulfilment in the "room" as it serves as a kind of a security, close to Ma undivided. He has never been without her and had her all the time around him.

In the mirror phase, the child begins to recognise its image in the mirror, though in the beginning there is a conflict. Jack plays with the mirror and finds his image similar to that of Ma:

I stick out my tongue in Mirror. Ma behind me, I can see my face stuck over hers like a mask... "What am I like?" She taps Mirror where's my forehead, her finger leaves a circle. "The dead spit of me."

"Why I'm your dead spit?" The circle's disappearing. It just means you look like me. I guess because you're made of me, like my spit is. Same brown eyes, same big mouth, same pointy chin....(8)

The mirror image which is called the Other is his Ma. This identification of the mother as his Other image is the vital part of the novel. The symbolic that has to get fixed as the next phase in Jack's life does not happen and it troubles the mother who recognises the "stunted growth" of her son and decides to escape for his sake. No symbolic process happens in Jack's life at the age of seven too. He still belongs to the mother and clings on to her both physically and mentally. He finds pleasure in all her words and actions.

Ma is both the mother and the father to Jack. The escape episode is her effort to push him slowly into the realms of the symbolic and prepares him to communicate with other people outside. He slowly starts seeing himself as separate from Ma. He begins to claim that he is a boy and not a girl with his long hair. His interest in football affirms his movement into the next phase. He starts understanding the subjectivity of Ma

and feels she is right in asking for a room for herself, a space of her own and her desire to get back to college sometime. His farewell to both the the room and breast feed proves his distinctive identity - a male.

It is also to be understood that the Phallus in Lacanian theory is not subjective of only the male. In the novel *Ma* is the signifier, the Phallus who guards her child in the absence of a paternal power. She assumes the role of the father too and proves that the notion of Phallus only psychological and need not necessarily be "man" or "woman."

Thus psychoanalysis traces the progress of psychosexual stages to learn the gender roles and Room has given ample scope to learn the gender identities of the Ma and her child. Emma Donoghue deals with power struggles and invests gender equity through the character of Ma. Masculinity or femininity is not about being a male or female but gender itself should refer to the social and culture constructions. Gender is thus performative and solely depends on the role played by the person.

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