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Exploring Various Facets of Identity Crisis of the Child Protagonist in *Emma Donoghue's Room*

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Abstract

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan in his theory of identity formation states that there exist three stages in the creation of identity for a child. The three stages are imaginary stage, symbolic stage and real stage. The paper titled "Exploring Various Facets of Identity Crisis of Child Protagonist in Emma Donoghue's *Room*" is an expedition of this statement through the child protagonist Jack from Emma Donoghue's 2010 novel *Room*. Novel narrates the story of Joy Newsome and her child Jack and how they manage to escape from the imprisonment of Old Nick. During the imprisonment period Ma was locked within a sound proofed cell and Jack was born due to the continuous rape of Old Nick. Whenever they came outside from the imprisonment Jack's misshapen identity formation became evident. This paper tries to analyse the mishappenings in Jack's identity formation and how those things affect his outside life.

Keywords – Room, Psychoanalysis, Jacques Lacan, Identity Formation, Crisis.

Introduction

Psychology is defined as the 'science of mental life' by William James, one of the founders of modern psychology. A revolutionary theory of mind, of feeling, and of behaviour, emphasizing the unconscious mental processes with the goal of gaining insight into the individuals' inner world and how it affects his or her emotions, behaviour, and relationships formulate the framework of 'Psychoanalysis'. Psychoanalytic criticism is a literary theory or criticism which stands for the psychoanalytical reading of a literary work. This approach of literary criticism is much indebted to psychoanalysts like Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. Jacques Lacan, the psychoanalyst who always advocated "return to Freud", formulated the different stages in identity formation in response to Sigmund Freud's concept of human psyche.

Reading an Emma Donoghue book is like falling into a deep friendship with an unlikely stranger: a lady of the evening...., an imprisoned child. The author's empathy for outsiders makes for captivating characters; she illustrates the complex inner lives of her creations with a candor that shows humanity at its best and worst. (Ghaman)

The Irish-Canadian novelist and playwright Emma Donoghue (1969), through her novel *Room* (2010), tries to portray Elisabeth Fritzl Felix case from Austria in her own way with the aid of a five years old child narrator. The real life incident of Elisabeth Fritzl was happened in Austria. Elisabeth was abducted when she was 18 by her own father and thereafter for twenty four years she was been held as a hostage. During these years she was been continuously raped by her father and thus she became the mother of her seven children. Fortunately, in 2008 they were found by the police. Since the novel *Room* is told in a 5 year old child's narration it is obvious that Emma Donoghue's key inspiration is the 5 year old son of Elisabeth Fritzl Felix.

Novel *Room* is divided into five sections namely 'Presents', 'Unlying', 'Dying', 'After' and 'Living'. When Joy Newsome or Ma was eighteen years old, she was abducted by Old Nick and locked her in a sound proofed 'Room'. He used to rape her continuously and thus Jack was born. Jack and Ma spent their whole time within that room without having any interaction with the outside world. Fortunately, when Jack was five years old, they managed to escape from that prison. After seven years of imprisonment though Ma escaped to the outer world she tried hard to cope up with the outside world. Jack's condition was more pitiable since his childhood was prisoned within that room. Emma Donoghue ends the novel with the reliance of starting a new life outside the room.

When we go for the psychoanalysis of the five year old character Jack we can find certain problems in his identity formation. Jack's childhood has been prisoned within a room up to his five years. He lacks lots of things that a child should have during his identity formation period. This work aims to find out the lacks and defaults in Jack's identity formation through the lens of Jacques Lacan's Identity Formation theory.

Review of Literature

The life complexities of Jack and Ma open the two extreme facets of mental health. The horrific living circumstances inside the room and the challenging beginnings outside the room (Maria Elena Jaime de Pablos). Trauma will impact different individuals in diverse ways. For instance, if Ma suffers from trauma both within and outside the room, Jack suffers only when he comes outside. The victimisation of these people by the media also impacts their mental health (Lucia Lorenzi). Even though Ma has attempts to confront her present identity with the past, the recovering process is not at all an easy task to carry on. Therefore Ma goes through different trauma, such as captivity, sexual abuse and media impacts (Agnes Anijalg).

Discussion and Analysis

Identity formation and crisis

Identity, often described as finite and consisting of separate and distinct parts, formed through a complex process in which humans develop a clear and unique view of themselves. Jacques Lacan, the French psychoanalyst, talks about the three stages in identity formation. Lacan constructs this model of Identity formation from childhood onwards. This takes as a three-stage process, as Lacan calls them: 1) Imaginary stage, 2) Symbolic stage, 3) Real stage

1)The imaginary stage - This stage is much associated with the reflection in the mirror and hence this stage is also called the Mirror Stage. Here the child makes its first identification with the reflection in the mirror. In this stage child's sense of the self is similar to its conception of the relationship between himself and the mother. Child does not see himself and the mother as separate entities. And also, he does not see any distinction between himself and the reflection. So, in imagery

the child seeks to erase all the differences and otherness by imaging himself as the person in the mirror and seeing himself and his mother as same.

As far as Jack's identity formation is concerned there exists certain differences since he has a different environment. When the novel starts, he is a five year old child. From the beginning stage itself there exists certain problems with Jack's identity formation. For Lacan the mirror stage is the homologue for the mother or child symbolic relation and he connects it with the 'desire-of-the mother'. Child here misrecognises himself with the mirror image and therefore this stage is also called as metaphoric stage. Lacan describes that in this mirror stage the child becomes the signifier and the mirror or reflection becomes the signified.

2)The symbolic stage - Lacan considers this stage as the most important formulation in the process of Identity formation. It is in this stage that the child enters society and social relations. Child finds the difference between him and mother and considers both as different entities. When a child discovers that he is different from others, he understands that he cannot desire the mother. This desire of the mother is now prohibited by the name of father. Thus, mother stands for the desire of the absent and father stands for the threat of the absent.

According to Lacan, a child will consider itself exactly the same as his mother during the imaginary stage and when he enters in the second stage, the symbolic, he recognizes himself as a different person from his mother. Though Jack considers himself a little bit different from his Ma, he is not ready to accept his Ma as a separate entity.

"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..." "I'm staring at us at the same time and the us in Mirror are staring back. "Not same nose". "Well, you've got a kid nose right now. I hold it. "Will it fall off and an adult nose grow?" "No, no, it'll just get bigger. Same brown hair- "But mine goes all the way down to my middle and yours just goes on your shoulders." (Donoghue 9-10)

This is because he lacks social relations. He does not have any social relations with anybody else other than his Ma. Therefore, he is not willing to accept himself and his Ma as different entities completely. Throughout his narrations we can find lots of usage of 'me and Ma' where Jack can use with me only or Ma only. For example, while explaining the pictures in *Dylan the Digger* Jack says "In the fifth picture the cat falls down, but cats have nine lives, not like me and Ma with just one each." (18)

3)The real stage- This is the stage where both imaginary and symbolic come into conflict with each other and control each other. This is the stage where the child's illusion from the imaginary is at odds with the sense of otherness from the symbolic. Child may consider himself as an extension of his parents, but at the same time a child considers himself as a person distinct from others. Lacan connects these three stages in the making of psyche with Saussure and Emily Benveniste's linguistics theories.

Though Jack's 'desire of mother' is disrupted to a certain degree due to Old Nick, but is not fully suppressed within the Room. Therefore, there is no complete 'lack' or 'absence'. When analysing Jack's language too there exists a number of differences. His encounters with the non-human objects participate differently in his identity formation and it challenges the conventional logic of Identity. These encounters create both discomfort and amazement at the same time. Thus, Jack struggles a lot to make sense of the real world. So this non-human interaction affects Jack's process of identity formation both positively and negatively. Vicky Kirby calls this as a "relentless process of Identity formation".

Though Jack develops a caring behaviour to the living objects (spider, mouse) within the Room, he struggles much to adjust to the outside world once they manage to escape. Jack's choice of words

indicates a blurring between human and the non-human, as he does not seem to distinguish between himself as a human and things as being other.

"I'm not in Room. Am I still me?" (123) This was the immediate response of Jack when he and his Ma managed to escape physically from the room. Jack's identity crisis starts to popup soon after their escape. For Jack Room was his 'comfort zone'. Outside the Room he is doubtful about his identity. He was not able to communicate properly. "I can't remember what to shout, I'm on mute, I just keep running at them." (125)

Jack also faces the problems of gender identity when he comes outside. It is only when Jack is outside without Ma, he is able to attain his manhood or boyhood. When he is inside Jack possesses a girlish-boyish identity, but whenever he comes outside, he tries to attain and confirm his masculinity.

Nancy Chodorow, humanist psychoanalytic sociologist and psychoanalytic feminist, discusses her views on the mother - child relationship in her classical work *Reproduction and Mothering*. According to her view points for a boy child attaining masculinity happens only when he becomes autonomous. He should understand his mother and him are different entities. In Jack's case until the escape, he considers him and his Ma are same entities.

When they came outside Jack was full of confusions regarding "Me ana Ma" entity. "But I thought the her and the Ma were the same" (275). Once when Jack and Ma got separated due to Ma's suicidal attempt outside the room Jack became autonomous. The breast feeding also stopped because of this situation. Eventually Jack understood that men did not have long hairs. Ma to a certain extend encouraged her child to recognize the gender differences.

Some of the women grow longhair like us, I tell Ma, but the men don't... "Would you like a haircut?" asks Ma. "No." "It doesn't hurt. I had short hair before – back when I was nineteen." I shake my head. "I don't want to lose my strong." "Your what?" "My muscles, like Samson in the story." (196)

But finally he himself decides to cut his hair and understands that the hair cut will not affect his strength and also comes to the understanding of worldly conception of manhood with muscles. "I get the scissors from the drawer and cut my ponytail all off.... She says go look in a mirror but first I check my muscles, I still have my strong". (249- 250) Chodorow's argument that boys discover their masculine gender through independence comes true in Jack's case because Jack tries to attain his masculinity only when he and this Ma are separated.

Language Formation and Differences

In Lacan's opinion the child during the second stage acquires language and thus understands the difference and social relations between father, mother and I and others. Lacan considers the first stage that is imaginary or mirror stage as pre-linguistic stage, the stage occurs before the child acquires language. Lacan discusses the second stage that is the symbolic one as the stage when the child acquires language and begins to understand differences and social relations. For example in language, a child discovers that society has different names for 'father', 'mother' and 'child'. Child recognizes that 'mother' is different from the 'I'. The child here discovers an endless chain of signifiers. 'I', 'Mother', 'Father' and thereby discovers social relations. And finally Lacan considers the third stage that is the real stage as the stage where the psyche is caught between lack and the need to fulfill this lack.

While considering Jack's case though he acquired language his language is very much limited. Jack's perceptions of objects are expressed both in his own language and manifested through sensory components, as he sees, touches, cuddles and plays with "Table", "Cup", "Bed", and "Wardrobe" among others. Jack behaves with the objects as if these were alive. When a lack of social relations exists, these objects help him to expand his life and even to survive. But the problem is that these objects not

only introduce alternatives to normative forms of existence but also provide fictional engagements with trauma, with experiences of precarity.

Unnatural Relations

Because of Jack's difficulties in identity formation, his relationships with the non-living things are a little bit different. "In Wardrobe I always try to squeeze my eyes tight and switch off fast so I don't hear Old Nick come, then I'll wake up and it'll be the morning and I'll be in Bed with Ma having some and everything OK." (27) From the excerpt above it is clear that Jack not only gives the object life - like attributes but also describes his actions the same way we describe how we use things i.e., Jack "switches off" his eyes as we would switch off a light. This play with language, a form of "gesture", stresses not only how one's confinement and limited access to social contact led to different modes of expression, but it also illuminates a new way of thinking with objects.

He also has a strong relationship with one of his Ma's teeth that she lost. Bad Tooth is a lot more than just a rotten tooth that gave Ma pain and headache, it's a part of Ma, just like Jack is. Bad Tooth is made of Ma's dead spit, and when Ma tells Jack "You look like me". I guess because "you're made of me, like my spit is" he interprets that the Bad Tooth and him have a connection through Ma.

Bad Tooth is the only thing that Jack saved from Room, and when they get to the clinic, he doesn't think about it very often. After Ma's attempted suicide, Jack thinks about it almost every day, carrying it around in his mouth. Additionally, Bad Tooth eventually becomes just 'Tooth', signifying the only way that Jack has to connect with his mother.

After Ma has returned, happy and well, Jack realizes that he has swallowed Tooth. At first, he is devastated, going to great measures to look for it. But, after talking to Ma, he just wonders if Tooth is "going to be hiding inside [him] in a corner forever". This signifies that he will always have part of Ma inside of him, even when they are apart. He may have just needed Bad Tooth to realize it. Even though Jack tries to consider his Ma as a separate entity within his mind, within his unconscious there exists the thought that both are part to each other. Therefore, it becomes the id.

His strong emotional and physical attachment to rug also shows his particular relationship Jack has with the non human objects. While living in outside world too Jack shows his extreme love to that ugly nasty Rug. He continuously says that he wants die on this Rug itself. All these unnatural relations of Jack are formed only because of his mishappened identity formation.

Conclusion

When Emma Donoghue published *Room* in 2010, it was greeted with different types of reviews like "taut, devastating and gripping" and "absorbing, truthful and beautiful". (Barr 2) Author is focusing on how Jack and Ma are trying to make sense of their existence. Both Ma and Jack undergo lots of psychological problems due to the abnormal environment of Room. Jack who was brought only within the room, of course would have certain psychological complexities especially identity formation crisis whenever he found the outside world.

While analysing Jack's growing phase with the lens of Jacques Lacan's identity Formation Theory it is evident that his formation phases are somewhat different from the theory. He cannot distinguish between his Ma and him; he lacks social interactions and also his dictionary is too much limited in words. These defaults affect him as soon as he encounters with the outside world.

Jack is forced to step out of his comfort zone when he physically escapes from the room. Since he lacks social interaction, he becomes more stressful during this stage. He doesn't know how to interact with others both through words and deeds. Even though Emma Donoghue ends the novel with the hope of new beginnings, for Jack this will not be an easy task to acquire. But if Jack gets adequate therapies and proper sessions, there are possibilities for his new adventures.

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