

# “Textual Exploration: A Study of Postmodern Elements in the Novel *Room*”

M. Iswarya,

Assistant Professor,

MSU Constituent College,

Kadayanallur

## Abstract

The paper entitled “Textual Exploration: A Study of Postmodern Elements in the Novel *Room*” is to highlight the use of postmodern elements in the novel *Room*, and how it enhances the beauty of the novel. It also traces how these elements help Emma Donoghue in her literary venture to bring forth a powerful text.

This paper entitled “Textual Exploration: A Study of Postmodern Elements in the Novel *Room*” is to highlight the use of postmodern elements in the novel *Room*, and how it enhances the beauty of the novel. It also traces how these elements help Emma Donoghue in her literary venture to bring forth a powerful text. Emma Donoghue is a renowned Irish-Canadian literary historian, playwright, screenwriter and novelist. She is widely acclaimed for her 2010 novel *Room*. The novel *Room* has its own credit as it was the finalist for the Man Booker Prize. Donoghue combines real incidents along with her imagination to give readers an intellectual treat in the name of *Room*. The novel is acclaimed worldwide for its young narrator Jack who is alienated to the outside world. It is from the perspective of Jack and the narration is engulfed by the language of a five year old boy. The novel also portrays a mother, who nurtures a child as good as possible in a miserable condition.

Postmodernism has its origin from modernism. It is a movement from the second half of the twentieth century that emphasizes fragmentation. It denounces the distinction between the work of art and popular art which is common during modernism. Postmodern writers solemnly

celebrate fragmentation by claiming it as a phenomenon of liberation. “Modernism presented a fragmented view of human subjectivity and history with a sense of tragedy as something to be mounted as a loss. Postmodernism does not feel sorry about the fragmentation, it rather celebrates it and its attitude is essentially playful” (Sivaraman 4).

Postmodern intertextuality has a strong sense of craving to conceal the gap between the past and the present of the reader and to rewrite about the past in a new version. Intertextuality is the formation of a text’s meaning with reference to another text. The term intertextuality is widely used in postmodernism. It is a literary device that is characterized by the direct presence or trace of the text in another text. It is a term that probably conveys the connection between the texts. These traces are used by the writers in order to create a kind of interest and to add multiple layers to the text. The writers of postmodernism explore meta-fictional elements prominently within the creation of fiction. The role of meta-fiction can be described not through direct interaction with the readers rather through other specific devices such as allusion, quotation, paraphrasing, irony, pastiche, etc. These devices detail the underlying connections between readers, literary texts, and other works of art, documents, historical records and theories. One of the most important elements of postmodern work related to meta-fiction is intertextuality.

The term intertextuality is first launched by a Bulgarian-French literary critic and semiotician Julia Kristeva in her essay “Word, Dialogue, and Novel.” She is a multifaceted critic who works in many fields such as theology, literary criticism, semiotics, psychoanalysis, philosophy and politics. The intertextuality has various functional figures like allusion, quotation, plagiarism, translation, pastiche and parody. It is characterized by the author’s usage of another text or its trace in his works and also the reader’s ability to conceive and understand the relation between various texts while reading. The prominence of intertextuality in postmodernism is due to the incorporation of age old literary masterpieces and even minor works to produce a new work of art which has the traces of the past.

In most of the works of Donoghue, classical fairy tales are incorporated as a postmodern element of intertextuality. In her postmodern works, readers cannot see any mourning for the loss instead it has open-ended aspects of loss to pave way for different forms of identity and establishes a basement for great social change. In postmodern fiction, intertextuality is considered as one of the key elements. Postmodernist writers do not use any chapter division and also the novel is not written in any conventional linear sense, one leading to the other instead the novel is organized into diverse sections with separate titles. Donoghue's novel *Room* does not have any chapter division instead the division of the novel is characterized by several chapters as "Presents," "Unlying," "Dying," "After," and "Living" respectively. The division is quite similar to the technique used by Burrough. His technique of using confused plot does not allow the readers to understand the logic behind the text. He nullifies the idea of depicting a single and undeviating theme in the fiction. His works are brimmed with multiple and closely interconnected themes. Donoghue too follows the technique of Burrough.

Donoghue refers to numerous works of literature and television series in her novel *Room*. She mentions about children's books, mysterious, thriller, and fantasy books. Each book has its own significance in the novel. Some of the books are *My Big Book of Nursery Rhymes*, *Dylan the Digger*, *The Runaway Bunny*, *Pop- Up Airport*, *The Shack*, *Twilight*, *The Guardian*, *Bittersweet Love*, *The Da Vince Code*. The author expresses her gratitude for the inspiration she has received from these works as well as a greater scope for her imagination along with these multifaceted works. All these books act as a source of entertainment to Jack in the novel *Room*. For Ma, it is a piece of outside world which she cannot get back till her rescue. Through the conversation between Jack and Ma, readers can understand these books as the outcome of Nick's favour to them. Donoghue gives many books and television series of kids to point out that the narrator is a very small boy. Many incidents in the novel are narrated from a five year old boy's perspective.

The novel *Room* explores the slight distinction between fiction and reality. Donoghue's ingenuity helps her to use the experience which is extracted from the real case with the help of

some fictional elements. Her art of interweaving is evident throughout the novel. Many instances are drawn from real-life stories but Donoghue carefully combines the real incidents and fictional elements.

Donoghue exhibits the problems of physical confinement which is a common factor in this world. The unrealistic picturisation of certain characters and the incidents make the readers decide about the reality in the novel. When Jack escapes from the truck, he finds a man along with his daughter and a pet dog. Donoghue purposefully inserts a paternal character at that moment in the novel. From the settings, the readers can see that it is set during the night time. When Ajeet, the father of the small girl sees Jack's wound, he worries much as he has a daughter of Jack's age. The long hair of Jack gives him an appearance of a little girl. Donoghue creates a character named Ajeet to act as a saviour for Jack to rescue him from his misery. A skeptical reader can question the reliability of the incident as it happens after dark.

The novels possess surrealistic imageries too. The term surrealism denotes a particular thought and movement in various fields like literature, arts and theatre. They try to amalgamate the confused domain of reality and imagination. The exponents of surrealism venture to mix up the difference between consciousness and unconsciousness in writing and painting by using illogical juxtaposition of images. Ma, in *Room*, has unconditional love towards Jack, but she is aware that Jack is the result of the sexual harassment which she has encountered in the room during her confinement. Ma often refers Jack as "The dead spit of me" (*Room* 8). With a heavy heart, she expresses her unfortunate situation as well as the resemblance of herself in Jack.

Donoghue brings in the television series "Dora the Explorer" in the novel *Room*. Jack is very much fond of the cartoon series of Dora and he imagines Dora to be his friend. He describes Dora thus, "She always wears Backpack who's more inside than out, with everything Dora needs like ladders and space suits, for her dancing and playing soccer and flute and having adventures with Boots her best friend monkey" (*Room* 12). Dora has an adventurous journey with her

monkey friend Boots. Jack believes that the fantasy series to be real. He believes that the letters he writes to Dora reaches her.

The television series “Dora the Explorer” helps children to learn new words. Some words are repeated to make the children to be familiarized with new vocabulary. Ma uses this technique to escape from their confinement. As Jack is familiar to the repeated words, he easily learns the words to execute Ma’s contriving plan. She teaches him the words which have meaning but not in an order of a sentence. She teaches him as, “*Sick, Truck, Hospital, Police, Save MA*” (Room 136). This is their first plan to get rid of the hellish dungeon. In this plan, Ma makes arrangements to Jack’s pretension of being terribly sick due to vomiting and severe diarrhea. When Old Nick says, “I will get him something stronger from the all-night drugstore” (Room 149), the plan entangles. Ma makes changes to the words and teaches him as, “*Dead, Truck, Wriggle Out, Jump, Run, Somebody, Note, Police, Blowtorch*” (Room 164). In their second plan, Ma makes certain changes to make Old Nick believe Jack’s death. Though, he forgets some of the words in his escapade, the word sequence helps him to reveal others that he is been kidnapped.

One of the notable functional figures of intertextuality used in these novels is pastiche. It is a piece of literature, music, or visual arts like drawing, painting, video that imitates another work of art by artists without parodying. In the novel *Room*, the author has brought in kid television series in a powerful manner. “Dora the Explorer” is a renowned animated American television series. The prominent goals of the main characters are achieved only with the help of this television series. In reality, the television series is meant for educational purpose. In the novel, it acts as a weapon for a mother who tries to sharpen her son’s intellect in order to save herself and her son from the misery. Not only the series but also the advertisements shown in the television help Jack to be clarified about the outside world. Since he has not seen the real world, he is curious to know it. When he watches the advertisements, he correlates that Nick goes to the shop which is inside the television.

Ma being confined in the room for years tries to find her way out by training her son. In the beginning, the television series mentioned in the novel *Room*, does not reveal its importance. Eventually, the hidden plan behind it comes to limelight through the training of Ma. Jack is undoubtedly a boy with strong memory power and questioning attitude. But as he is brought up in a confined space, he is unaware of the outside world. He has the ability to understand things when it is explained to him. But there is difficulty in the execution of the plan.

Jack has not seen any human being other than his mother. This is the reason why he has to encounter certain obstacles in their escapade. The mother tries to train him to narrate the incidents happened to her in few words. In the “Dora the Explorer,” Dora repeats the stations they have to cross while reaching her destinations. Ma uses the same technique to make little Jack understand her plan to ask for help. The series helps them not only in their escape but also to give knowledge to Jack about his own family background. Jack knows that Dora has a family of her own. In the later part of the novel, it helps Ma to teach about her own family.

Intertextuality incorporates many functional figures including allusion, quotation, pastiche, etc. Allusion in a literary work is also an important functional figure in intertextuality. In this novel, there are many instances where allusions are made to connect the condition of Ma in a confined room. In the beginning of the novel, Ma narrates her pathetic situation through stories. She narrates the Little Mermaid story to Jack, but once she fabricates “The Little Mermaid” story to indirectly reveal her situation to Jack. But Jack is unaware of the real world. In the mermaid story, Ma says that the mermaid’s magic comb has been taken away by the captor so that she cannot escape to the sea. Ma narrates, “And she runs away to the rocks, and slips down into the sea” (*Room* 84). When she finds the comb she escapes from her confinement. When she forgets to mention about the baby of the mermaid during the escapade, he cries as he imagines himself to be the mermaid’s baby. In *Room*, Jack acts as a magic comb to Ma, who saves her from her misery.

Donoghue has sparingly used the name of certain books and incidents to increase the progress of the novel. The wide range of works used in the novel in the beginning indicates the contriving plot in the mind of Ma regarding their escape. In the novel, one can see the role of certain literary pieces. *The Count of Monte Cristo* is an adventure novel by a French writer Alexander Dumas. The novel depicts the escaping scene of Dantes by following the teachings and advices of a fellow prisoner Abbe Faria. Ma tells the story of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* to explain Jack how to act as a dead person. Donoghue indulges in the arena of intertextuality. In *Room* readers can find intertextual traces of several books. The strong sense of postmodern elements in the novel enhances the literary quality of the text. In the novel, the reliability of the prominent characters is questioned since the prominent characters are unreliable due to certain features. In the novel *Room*, the narrator Jack is a five year old boy and thus the story is entirely from the perspective of Jack. His narration is based on his own experience and his limited knowledge that he acquires during confinement. He does not have any proper upbringing and social contacts. *Room* is endowed with multiple features of postmodernism such as intertextuality, pastiche, parody, etc. The novel is enhanced by the use of some of the functional figures in postmodernism.

#### Works Cited

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