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Noémi ALBERT

Faculty of Humanities

University of Pécs

Ifjúság útja 6, H-7624 Pécs

noemi_albert@yahoo.com

UDK 821.111(417).09 Donoghue, E.-31

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“JACK BE NIMBLE, JACK BE QUICK...”: A CURIOUS EXISTENCE IN EMMA DONOGHUE’S *ROOM*

Abstract

Emma Donoghue’s 2010 novel presents a mother and son in confinement, locked in a soundproof garden shed. The text operates with the dichotomy of inside/outside, recognizable in such different manifestations as the son’s perception of the world, confinement and escape, and others. These dualities reflect on the novel’s most prominent issue, which is trauma as experienced by Ma and Jack, respectively. Its investigation comprises the core of the paper, which entails a careful analysis of the peculiar bond between mother and son, breastfeeding a five-year-old in confinement, and the role language plays in the novel. The analysis of these issues will ultimately shed light on existence itself as particularized in the two characters. In the novel, this existence comes to the fore through the focus on the fundamental human values that stand at the core of their personas and their connection.

Keywords: Emma Donoghue, *Room*, trauma, rape, child, breastfeeding, inside/outside

Introduction

"When Old Nick creaks Bed, I listen and count fives on my fingers, tonight it's 217 creaks. I always have to count till he makes that gaspy sound and stops. I don't know what would happen if I didn't count, because I always do" (Donoghue 46), remarks five-year-old Jack while his mother's regular visitor is in Room. Although the man's actions are inconceivable for the young boy, he senses the tension, he senses that his mother is in danger. Meanwhile, Jack is supposed to sleep in Wardrobe, one of his many object-friends from Room, which is his home, his world, and his entire universe.

The narrative employs the point of view of the child whose innocence stands in stark contrast with the persona of the kidnapper and rapist whose nocturnal visits he witnesses. The events as experienced by the boy raise moral questions and point out fundamental human values, embodied by Jack and his mother, which are in conflict with the character of Old Nick and his immorality. Thus, "it is through narratives and fictional worlds that we are sensitized to ethical questions and moral inquiries insofar as they open up possible ways of life, which we can either subscribe to or reject" (Baumbach, Grabes, and Nünning 3). Yet, "the importance of literature and other media for the dissemination of ethical values within a culture has not yet been duly acknowledged and submitted to scrutiny" (Grabes 3-4). Emma Donoghue's *Room* (2010) consequently creates a fictional world that sensitizes the reader towards fundamental human values and moral inquiries through the employment of a naïve and subjective point of view and simultaneously offers the reader an opportunity to question the authority of literature, its dangers, and the role of media.

The paper chooses trauma as its central issue and looks at how the author carefully balances the novel's highly controversial issue by consciously shifting emphasis from a young woman's traumatic hardships of her kidnapping and subsequent confinement and rape to shed light on human values that persist despite traumatic experiences. Going against traditional literary works that end in the escape of the victim, the true start in discussing the trauma as faced individually by Jack and Ma happens exactly with the planning and realization of their escape. This dichotomy is presented through the utilization of a child narrator, who experiences language, literature, arts in general, music, bodies,

and objects with awe and appreciation. It is exactly through the child narrator's voice that the novel puts emphasis on the affirmation of such fundamental human values as security, independence, wisdom, kindness, and tradition. They will be analyzed with the help of Shalom H. Schwartz's theory of basic human values. Schwartz sees the values as subjective beliefs, closely tied to emotions, motivational and abstract, and serving as standards (3-4) and he divides them into ten distinct types: self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, power, security, conformity, tradition, benevolence, and universalism (5-7).

As *Room* uses the point of view of a five-year-old child, it is "the reader's task to decode the moral qualities of life, norms and values" (Baumbach, Grabes, and Nünning 4-5) in the novel. The reader's process of decoding will mostly rely on the experience of alterity, which is according to Nünning,

accompanied by a destabilization of an accepted ethical framework as well as an uncertainty with regard to the fictional facts, thus creating indeterminacy with regard to interpretation and meaning. On the other hand, alterity is combined with the evocation of sympathy for the protagonists, which in turn is geared towards an acceptance, perhaps even an appreciation of "the other." (372)

In the novel, the alterity is brought into being in two ways: first, as Jack's narration and childlike perspective are filled with awe and amazement towards ordinary objects, he approaches events and actions deemed boring by adults with fascination. Second, it is observable through the bond between Ma and Jack and the issue of breastfeeding, their relation to their captor, Old Nick, and their language.

According to several scholars, *Room* can also be categorized as a *captivity narrative*, reminiscent of Natascha Kampusch's or Jaycee Dugard's kidnapping memoirs (see: Chi 29). The genre of captivity narrative first appeared in the early modern era as a "text devoted extensively or exclusively to documenting a real experience of subjugation in a foreign land" (Snader 1). Later, it became an exclusively American genre, focusing on the relationship between Anglo-American captives and Native American captors (Snader 1). Today the concept can be applied to a wide array of literary and nonliterary writing, with different scenarios depicting the relationship between captor and captive. In traditional captivity narratives, children were usually no more than passive victims (Marienstras 35); nowadays, the popularity of child narrators is undeniably rising,

with texts changing their perspective and focus and altering the impact of traumatic events.

The perspective of the child narrator is the one that allows us to interpret the novel as a new kind of captivity narrative. Jack's young and unusual narrative voice "encourages us to revisit our concepts of what is normal, ordinary or human, and what is not" (Földvály 218). Furthermore, the very act of bringing the marginalized perspective of a child to the fore has a defamiliarizing effect on literary texts (Dinter 54). Consequently, Jack's voice further deepens themes and issues surfacing through the concept of the captivity narrative, one of which is the phenomenon of abjection/the abject – a state that we will approach through Julia Kristeva's interpretation. Kristeva's abject is grounded in utter physical repulsion and disgust, it zooms in on the ultimate details of the body, on its fluids and its defects. The abject violates the order between the outside and the inside of the body (Kristeva 53) through objects that are either excremental or menstrual (Kristeva 71). The child's experiences in *Room* can be understood through the phenomenon of abjection/the abject, with teeth falling out, Jack sucking on his mother's tooth, his body being out of control during his escape. For the child, however, none of these provokes disgust: to Jack, their captor is going to become the ultimate embodiment of abjection.

All of Jack's experiences are anchored in the garden shed he considers his home, moreover, his entire world. The meaning of the garden shed is contradictory for the characters: Ma sees the inescapability and confinement in it whereas for Jack *Room* is a space with endless possibilities, freedom, and security. And although the second half of the novel takes place in *Outside*, the significance of *Room* never tarnishes as it always represents one side of a duality that comprises the core of the novel, the duality that can be captured through several binaries, such as "death/life, trauma/ordinary life, tragedy/happiness" (Lorenzi 26). The memory of *Room* never fades, it always lurks in the consciousness of both Jack and Ma. The setting will ultimately comprise a quasi-framework to the novel as Jack feels the need to return to it and say a proper good-bye to all the friends he had during his first five years of life. This, however, could be the moment when the binaries are resolved, when Jack's life will not be determined by the duality of inside and outside anymore.

The purpose of the following chapters is to investigate the binaries of inside/outside, trauma/normalcy, reality/fantasy, captor/captive and, most important-

tly, to relate them to the two characters and analyze their impact on Jack and Ma separately. Through the careful analysis of the novel's numerous dualities, which ultimately organize into a system, we will attempt to chart and interpret the fundamental human values emphasized by the text. The dynamics between mother and son (which will be examined through the close bond between them and the issue of breastfeeding) gives us the opportunity to take a closer look at the emphasis this contemporary novel puts on several basic human values.

1. Trauma

1.1. *Inside*

Emma Donoghue consciously and purposefully chose a child narrator in hope of making “such a horrifying premise original, involving, but also more bearable: his innocence would at least partly shield readers on their descent into the abyss” (“Reading Group Guide to *Room*” 2). This argument involves several issues worthy of investigation; however, we will focus only on the latter part. In *Room*, the child voice thus opens up a totally new view on the traumatic issues of abduction, confinement, and rape. This narrative decision could be considered a conscious choice of not favoring either of the victim/perpetrator binary and bringing forth the shocking nature of these acts. According to Lucia Lorenzi, the perspective of the perpetrator would mirror their control over their victims' bodies, whereas voicing the perspective of the victim could result in the readers' over-identifying or misidentifying with the character (20). The five-year-old Jack is a largely unsuspecting bystander, greatly shielded from the perpetrator, who only intuits that something traumatic is happening to his mother. As a result,

Donoghue offers a critique of the fraught positions of both witness and victim (as well as victims who may not realize they are victims), unsettles her readers by making the act of textual interpretation significantly more complicated, and, ultimately, also subverts readers' expectations of narrative and visual pleasure. (Lorenzi 21)

To achieve this effect, Donoghue observed her five-year-old son's own language in order to create Jack's: “I charted my son's language,” Donoghue explains. “I followed him around like an anthropologist – writing down his strange grammar. And then I chose just a few of those classic 5-year-old traits to give to his speech. For instance, I love the way 5-year-olds try to make the past tense

regular – they all say, ‘I eated! I wonned!’” (“In Donoghue’s *Room*”). The peculiarity of the child’s language exerts its influence over several aspects of the novel, the most important being that his “verbs animate the inanimate and anthropomorphize the non-human” (Ricou 77). They reflect the way of thinking of an innocent child and through his character the novel brings to the fore such basic human values as benevolence and universalism (Schwartz 7).

Room and every object situated inside it are capitalized and personified. The contrast between Jack and Ma is rendered through the utilization of capital letters whenever Jack talks about the objects (such as “Dresser,” “Table,” etc.), which is pinned against Ma’s words that are rendered as “dresser,” “table,” etc. For instance, the boy has a sentimental connection with Rug throughout the novel: this raggedy, filthy object has been following him since his birth, it is his closest friend, his shield against the world. This perspective has dual function in the narrative: firstly, it opens a new way of experiencing Ma’s fate and the entire world of captivity; secondly, the childlike *naïveté* through which everything is experienced brings the reader back to a re-evaluation of the fundamental values comprising life itself.

Jack’s approach to each lifeless object testifies to the joint presence of two basic values from Schwartz’s system of ten: benevolence and universalism. Jack’s relation to his object friends shows his love and openness towards all. Since his environment is lacking in living beings, the poorly plant, the bed, and his prison become substitutes for them. The value of universalism shows in his inclusiveness, unbiased openness towards the entire world. Similarly, Jack’s first encounter with an outside creature, a mouse, testifies to his universal benevolence: “Then the wonderfulest thing, Mouse puts his mouth out, it’s pointy. I nearly jump in the air but . . . I don’t want to move and scare Mouse. I watch his hands, his whiskers, his tail all curly. He’s alive for real, he’s the biggest alive thing I ever saw, millions of times bigger than the ants or Spider” (Donoghue 39).

The development of Jack’s purity and benevolence is possible because he is shielded from the perpetrator who visits his mother at night. Although he cannot conceptualize what goes on during those visits, he has a clear sense of his mother’s struggles. As nothing is explicitly conveyed in the child’s language, the reader is faced with the task of decoding what is happening through the young witness’s rendering. Yet, this task is not that difficult since there is a pervasive feeling of unease that filters through the text. One of the most evocative textual

examples of this tension lies in the very name Jack associates with his mother's rapist:

Nothing makes Ma scared. Except Old Nick maybe. Mostly she calls him just *him*, I didn't even know the name for him till I saw a cartoon about a guy that comes in the night called Old Nick. I call the real one that because he comes in the night, but he doesn't look like the TV guy with a beard and horns and stuff. I asked Ma once is he old, and she said he's nearly double her which is pretty old. (Donoghue 14; emphasis original)

Like so many other instances of Jack's trains of thought in the novel, this also reveals several aspects of his personality, thinking, and knowledge of what is happening. For instance, in this short excerpt, the reader notices the funny nature of young children familiar only with the denotative meaning of words, such as "old," which seems to be enough for associating a name with an individual. Nevertheless, the reader cannot overlook the fact that Jack's choice of names points to his subconscious feeling of danger associated with *him*. The point of view of captivity narrative resurfaces again and is rendered through the dualism of self/other, embodied by the civilized and the barbaric. The captor is alien, belongs to a different world, similarly to Old Nick, who comes from the outside (the Outer Space where planets are zooming around Room), and thus his existence and entity are inconceivable for the child.

Furthermore, Jack's observations shed light on his mother's reluctance to name her perpetrator, possibly since the act of naming would humanize him. Later, Jack himself reflects on this aspect when he claims: "Men aren't real except Old Nick, and I'm not actually sure if he's real for real. Maybe half? ... I think Ma doesn't like to talk about him in case he gets realer" (Donoghue 23). This is one of many instances when Jack tries to come to terms with another set of binaries, namely real/unreal, which is the result of Ma's struggles to shield him from the outside world, to convince him that Room is all there is, so that the child would be content and even happy. Nevertheless, Jack's questioning of Old Nick's reality is not only connected to the fact that he comes from outside Room, but also to how his mother tries to keep them as far away from each other as possible.

Jack's descriptions of their days reveal complex processes and feelings that are evoked in the most subtle way possible. As Donoghue herself claimed during an interview, her intentions were not to create a "horror story or tearjerker, but a celebration of resilience and the love between parent and child" ("Room").

Slowly and gradually, more and more elements of terror surface for the attentive observer who notices Ma's struggles to escape. The pair's daily routine is carefully organized to encompass various activities that would facilitate Jack's physical and mental growth; yet, some games have a more complex purpose than to entertain and educate the child:

After nap we do *Scream* every day but not Saturdays or Sundays. We clear our throats and climb up on Table to be nearer Skylight, holding hands not to fall. We say "On your mark, get set, go," then we open wide our teeth and shout holler howl yowl shriek screech scream the loudest possible. Today I'm the most loudest ever because my lungs are stretching from being five. Then we shush with fingers on lips. I asked Ma once what we're listening for and she said just in case, you never know. (Donoghue 50)

Besides "Scream," the reader gets acquainted with a game called "Keypad," which consists of Ma giving Jack various numerical combinations to enter into the keypad that locks the door of their prison. Sometimes Jack wakes up to Ma repeatedly flashing the lamp that is placed right under Skylight.

Although Jack proves to be a sensitive boy who is even capable of noticing irony, we would not claim, contrary to Lucia Lorenzi, that he is totally aware of the power Old Nick has over his mother. He senses the tension, he is aware of his mother's pain, as Lorenzi herself presents in detail; for instance, after an altercation between his mother and Old Nick, Jack notices the marks of strangulation on her neck and says: "I see her neck again, the marks that he put on her, I'm all done giggling" (Donoghue 68). Yet, it cannot be stated that he is fully aware of all the traumatic events going on as then he would exert similar symptoms to those of his mother, who once every now and then freezes into a nonresponsive, almost catatonic state that Jack conceptualizes through claiming that his mother is gone. Her recurring state shows the clear signs of a traumatized person, something that Bessel van der Kolk terms as "depersonalization:" "blank stares and absent minds, the outward manifestation of the biological freeze reaction" (72).

In contrast to this, the child is largely free of these effects: "Jack, a fruit of a forced sexual union, is not shown to be as traumatized as would be expected. Whenever Old Nick, her perverse captor, comes to get his sexual satisfaction from Jack's Ma, her efforts to hide the little boy appear to be successful and she manages to protect Jack from physical and psychological injuries" (Földváry

212). Jack believes that the entire world is the garden shed and this very garden shed is more than his home: it is his friend, together with all the objects that are addressed by proper nouns as they are unique and also personified for him. He can make everything into a game and seems to have a carefree life in Room. The contrast between the two characters is palpable throughout the entire first half of the novel; however, it is the most pronounced when Ma's realization that their captor's dismissal means their approaching death clashes with the child who is content in his world measuring eleven square feet. This is the moment when she realizes that the only way to survive is to escape and to "unlie" to her son, who gets highly overwhelmed as a result of his world exponentially growing.

1.2. Outside

The confined world of Room causes a complex set of feelings and relations both between the two imprisoned characters and towards their prison itself. Although Jack is highly sensible to his mother's pain and suffering, he is successfully shielded from Old Nick, who is nothing more than a silhouette that Jack sometimes glimpses. The change commences, as it was stated before, with Ma's realization that they are in danger and with her plan to escape with Jack's help. The careful planning, together with the preparation of Jack himself, eventually resulting in their successful escape, introduces a new perspective on discussing trauma in the novel. With the end to their confinement, the mental processes and hardships seem to intensify, ultimately putting to test their entire world views and the mother-son relationship that was so close-knit inside Room.

Ma, the victim who has been abused for seven years, is further traumatized by the outside world she re-encounters after such a long period. She was abducted as a university student and she returns as a mother who lived in confinement. The greatest clash occurs between Ma's idealized vision of her life outside and the realization that re-integration is highly difficult. As she formulates it: "I keep messing up. I know you need me to be your ma but I'm having to remember how to be me as well at the same time and it's..." (Donoghue 277). She is conflicted by this new identity she recognizes in herself and her newfound dislike of it (Donoghue 405). Her identity crisis, however, is very differently treated by her doctor and nurse. Dr. Clay automatically attributes all the changes to the traumatic hardships suffered by Ma – "You had to change to survive" (Donoghue 405), whereas nurse Noreen points out: "Don't forget, you'd have changed

anyway. Moving into your twenties, having a child – you wouldn't have stayed the same" (Donoghue 406).

The climax of this clash occurs during an interview organized to satisfy the media's great interest in the pair's story of confinement and escape. Lorenzi asserts that even though Ma feels frustrated by these "traumatic narratives imposed on her" (25), as demonstrated by the above quotation, the urge to impose these narratives is often what is really traumatic. During the afore-mentioned interview, the journalist deliberately provokes Ma by asking her questions that were previously agreed upon as excluded from the topics to be discussed, such as the stillbirth previous to giving birth to Jack. The most severe blow comes when one of the journalists suggests that Ma's decision to keep Jack may have been a selfish act as she could have given him up for adoption: "It would have been a sacrifice, of course – the ultimate sacrifice – but if Jack could have had a normal, happy childhood with a loving family?" (Donoghue 297). The scene of the interview thus illustrates "the ways in which the media's insistent framing of traumatic narratives is, in many ways, precisely that which creates or compounds an individual's trauma" (Lorenzi 25).

The inclusion of the media into the novel thus serves as a metanarrative element, drawing attention to the meticulous self-reflexivity of the work itself. While the novel consciously emphasizes fundamental human values, as a counterpoint it also highlights the authority and, therefore, the inherent danger of literature and media. Consequently, in spite of Ma fighting against the traumatic narrative that the interviewer imposes – "It wasn't an ordeal to Jack, it was just how things were" (Donoghue 296) – it gradually fills her with more and more insecurity, resulting in depression and ultimately a suicide attempt. Contrary to Ma, her fears, and Dr. Clay's (or the society's) conceptions about Jack's life inside the fortified garden shed, to him the life in Room was the only way of living when he was content with everything. Thus, the traumatic narrative that the outside world vehemently imposes upon his life in Room is incomprehensible for the five-year-old child and his disturbance is largely the result of this clash between his and everybody else's views. Once again, Dr. Clay is the one who is adamant about revealing possible secret abuses suffered at the hands of Old Nick despite Ma's assurances that Jack was successfully sheltered from every danger. The following conversation between the child and the doctor thus tackles "the line between an accurate depiction of rightful concerns on the part

of mental health professionals and a criticism of the techniques of persuasive or leading questioning of children” (Lorenzi 24):

“Did this man ever do anything you didn’t like?”

I nod.

“Can you tell me what he did?”

“He cutted off the power so the vegetables went slimy.”

“Right. Did he ever hurt you?”

Ma says, “Don’t–”

Dr. Clay puts his hand up. “Nobody’s doubting your word,” he tells her. “But think of all the nights you were asleep. I wouldn’t be doing my job if I didn’t ask Jack himself, now, would I?” (Donoghue 235)

As Jack is at a highly impressionable age, those kinds of questions are dangerous because, as Dr. Clay himself claims, Jack is “still plastic” (Donoghue 268) or prone to forget his experiences in the shed, which, as Dr. Clay assumes, must have been traumatic. When Jack asks his mother whether he is supposed to forget, she cannot provide him with an answer (Donoghue 270), and this instance reflects the mother’s growing insecurity in her decisions and their effects on her son. As the effects of their years-long confinement become more and more apparent, Ma gradually falls into desperation. When she says: “I thought he was OK. More or less” (Donoghue 233), Jack poses a crucial question that reflects on his life in confinement and outside it: “Am I not OK?” (Donoghue 233).

As doubt and insecurity seem to be one of the central elements of the pair’s life in the outside world, Jack is certain that his real home was inside Room. Jack’s traumatic experience of his new life outside is reflected in the nightmares that begin to appear after their escape. The first instance of his dreaming, recounted by Jack himself, occurs right after their escape and is a fascinating blend of his experiences inside and outside Room: “In the night there’s vampire germs floating around with masks on so we can’t see their faces and an empty coffin that turns into a huge toilet and flushes the whole world away” (Donoghue 270). Another of his dreams combines the image of the man who helped them after the escape, his remorse at keeping more toys than he was allowed, and his fear caused by the story about crazy people sending them excrement – “Then Ajeet is all crazy putting Raja’s poo in a parcel to mail to us because I kept six toys, somebody’s breaking my bones and sticking pins in them” (Donoghue 271).

Jack's nightmares are his way of trying to come to terms with the overwhelming outside which, due to its proportions, complicated rules, and the loss of his mom (at least for a while), proves to be traumatic for him. The nightmares also testify to the afore-mentioned clash between Jack's and the society's expectations because Dr. Clay interprets the dreams as Jack's coping mechanism with the traumas suffered in Room – "Now you're safe, it's gathering up all those scary thoughts you don't need anymore, and throwing them out as bad dreams" (Donoghue 273), whereas Jack refuses such a notion as he experiences trauma exactly there where he would be expected to find safety, family, and freedom: "I don't say because of manners, but actually he's got it backwards. In Room I was safe, and Outside is the scary" (Donoghue 273).

2. Fundamental Human Values

2.1. *The Mother-son Bond*

In the second part of the novel taking place after the escape, the doctor treating mother and son claims that Jack is "like a newborn in many ways" (Donoghue 182). Although Dr. Clay's observation is medical, this statement can be applied to the child's relationship with his mother as well. Inside Room, Jack grows up in total isolation, with only a TV serving as a quasi-link with the outside world. He believes that the channels are fantastic planets as Ma tells him that what he sees on TV is not real. The results of this isolation become truly visible only after their escape from the confinement, for instance in Dr. Clay's diagnosis that "there are likely to be challenges in the area of, let's see, social adjustment, obviously, sensory modulation – filtering and sorting all the stimuli barraging him – plus difficulties with spatial perception" (Donoghue 182). Besides these, Jack behaves like a baby when with his mother. The close bond they share is reminiscent of newborns and toddlers to whom their mother means the entire world. However, due to confinement, Jack's psychological progress is hindered, and he can be said to be stuck in the Lacanian *imaginary order* – the fundamental narcissism by which the human subject creates fantasy images of both himself and his ideal object of desire. Jack realizes that his body is separate from the world and his mother and this makes him anxious and in need to identify with someone. While in confinement, Jack is incapable of progressing into *the symbolic order*, which would turn the need into desire and would facilitate his coping with others, because he constantly strives to identify with his mother.

This particularity has already resurfaced on numerous occasions in *Room* as the great emphasis is put on the two characters sharing everything, even a toothbrush, a towel, etc. There are no personal possessions in *Room* and Jack does not even get a chance to comprehend this concept. After their escape, his first traumatic experiences are connected to exactly this discrepancy. Jack is so tightly connected to his mother that he cannot imagine a moment away from her and sharing things with his mother seems the most natural thing in the world. This is gradually and then more and more abruptly shattered. The first instance of their separation is barely noticeable: “There’s a super thick white towel we can use each, not one to share. I’d rather share but Ma says that’s silly” (Donoghue 215). Later, their connection visibly falters when Ma receives a gift from her brother:

Back in our room on the bed there’s a little machine with a note from Paul, Ma says it’s like the one she was listening to when Old Nick stole her . . .

“Let me.”

“It’s called ‘Bitter Sweet Symphony,’ when I was thirteen I listened to it all the time.” She puts one bud in my ear.

“Too loud.” I yank it out.

“Be gentle with it, Jack, it’s my present from Paul.” I didn’t know it was hers-not-mine. In *Room* everything was ours. (Donoghue 275)

The natural process of the child’s detachment from the mother becomes a traumatic, disturbing experience for Jack because of its belatedness and suddenness. It is also fueled by his mother’s impossibility to cope with her own situation: she would like to regain her life as she left it seven years ago; however, the world has changed, she has changed and, most importantly, she returns with a child. The tension inherent in the ongoing clash affects Jack as well. The boy who has been raised with discipline and according to a clearly and meticulously organized timetable is in the outside allowed to eat whenever and whatever he wants. While this freedom would be liberating to most kids, to a child who has never known that this kind of freedom is even possible, it is suffocating.

Jack’s clinging to his mother seems rather disturbing and unnatural to the reader not because it cannot be noticed with other children but because children gradually conceive of themselves as individuals and slowly detach themselves from their mothers. “While most young children are hugely dependent on their parents, he exhibits abnormal levels of this and abnormal behaviours for his

age" (Walsh). For instance, while still in Room, Jack is disturbed when he realizes that his mother is sometimes awake when he himself is asleep:

I figure out to do off the knot, I make the paper flat, it's a drawing, just pencil, no colors. I don't know what it's about, then I turn it. "Me!" Like in Mirror but more, my head and arm and shoulder in my sleep T-shirt. "Why are the eyes of the me shut?"

"You were asleep," says Ma.

"How you did a picture asleep?"

"No, I was awake. Yesterday morning and the day before and the day before that, I put the lamp on and drew you." She stops smiling. "What's up, Jack? You don't like it?"

"Not—when you're on at the same time I'm off."

"Well, I couldn't draw you while you were awake, or it wouldn't be a surprise, would it?" Ma waits. "I thought you'd like a surprise."

"I prefer a surprise and me knowing." She kind of laughs. (Donoghue 5-6)

His first reaction shows signs of astonishment and then pure anger can be noticed. Their relationship in Room gradually changes, with Jack showing more individuality:

I still don't tell her about the web. It's weird to have something that's mine-not-Ma's. Everything else is both of ours. 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 coloring blue crayon on top of yellow that makes green. (Donoghue 11-12)

Jack knows that his mother would kill the spider he found if he told her, so he decides to keep it a secret. However, his subsequent train of thought is even more significant because it shares his view of the connectedness to his mother. To him, total unity is the ideal existence. This belief provides him with security and ultimately helps him during his escape from Room. In the outside, however, he exhibits signs of greater individuality and acceptance of the necessity of detachment: "I ask if we can go back to sleep again and Ma says sure, but she's going to read the paper. I don't know why she wants to read the paper instead of being asleep with me" (Donoghue 230-31).

The strength of the mother-son bond is best captured when Ma tells Jack that he is *the dead spit of her* (Donoghue 8), a curious saying that catches the interest of the five-year-old still getting acquainted with language. Ma's explanation of this expression – "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" (Donoghue 8) – will guide Jack in his views. Similarly, when Ma's bad tooth falls out, which, according to Jack, is also "her dead spit" (Donoghue 128), he becomes inseparable from it: he often puts it in his mouth, sucks on it, places it in his sock before his escape, talks to it – "*Are you there, Tooth? I can't feel you but you must be in my sock, at the side. You're a bit of Ma, a little bit of Ma's dead spit riding along with me*" (Donoghue 171; emphasis original), clings to it in the outside while his mother is in the hospital recovering after her suicide attempt. According to Kathleen Walsh, the tooth "is much like a pacifier, and in that the comfort Jack gets from the action of sucking it resembles the comfort involved in breastfeeding." The strong connection between Ma and Jack results primarily from the mother's instincts of nurturing and shielding her child from all possible dangers as women attribute "more importance . . . to benevolence values and also to universalism, conformity, and security values" (Schwartz 9). The bond between mother and son changes substantially with the time spent apart when Ma is treated after her suicide attempt. When Jack "returns to Ma their relationship appears to be more stable and he is slightly less dependent" (Walsh). Jack's increasing independence can perhaps be attributed to the fact that Ma stopped lactating and thus "her body's physical limitations prevent them from continuing the same mother-and-infant relationship they had for his first five years" (Walsh). Indeed, it seems that breastfeeding itself is of paramount importance for the pair, mostly for Jack for whom it represents the strongest bond between him and his mother. Nursing will, therefore, be analysed separately, only to be eventually re-connected with the issue of the pair's bond.

2.2. *Breastfeeding*

The motif of breastfeeding appears to grow more and more prominent in literature, especially in the works of black women writers, such as Toni Morrison, who reflect on the bond between mother and child, which is most emphasized through the act of nursing itself. In Morrison's *Beloved* for example, the protagonist is a slave mother, forcefully deprived of her breast milk, who kills one of her daughters, the one for whom there was no milk left. Morrison also reflects on the destiny of slave mothers who were forced to nurse white children instead of their

own: "Nan had to nurse whitebabies and me too because Ma'am was in the rice. The little whitebabies got it first and I got what was left. Or none. There was no nursing milk to call my own" (Morrison 200). According to O'Reilly, "the taking of breast milk through the practice of wet nursing signifies the appropriation and commodification of slave women's motherlove" (129). When Sethe, the mother, claims that "Nobody will ever get my milk no more except my own children" (Morrison 200), her statement symbolizes her empowerment, her decision to fight for her milk and thus for her children. Despite its empowering nature, in the works of black women writers breastfeeding/nursing seems to be grounded in binary opposites, such as male/female, activity/passivity, pride/shame, control/helplessness, all of which are ultimately connected to violence itself. As the presence of those dichotomies can also be detected in Emma Donoghue's *Room*, the novel will be analyzed from the perspective of the nursing narrative line as well.

In *Room*, breastfeeding either shocks the observer or voices general condemnation or repudiation. This occurs, for instance, when Ma nurses Jack while her statement is taken at the police precinct:

I'm still thirsty, I lift her T-shirt again and this time she puffs her breath and lets me, she curls me against her chest.

"Would you, ah, prefer...?" asks the Captain.

"No, let's just carry on," says Ma. It's the right, there's not much but I don't want to climb off and switch sides because she might say *that's enough* and it's not enough.

Ma's talking for ages about Room and Old Nick and all that, I'm too tired for listening. A she person comes in and tells the Captain something.

Ma says, "Is there a problem?"

"No no," says the Captain.

"Then why is she staring at us?" Her arm goes around me tight. "I'm nursing my son, is that OK with you, lady?" Maybe in Outside they don't know about having some, it's a secret. (Donoghue 199-200; emphasis original)

This scene perfectly fits Kristeva's concept of the abject: as breastfeeding is characterized by bodily fluids that violate the order between the outside and inside of the body (Kristeva 53), the observers' gaze at it is utterly disgusted. The disgusted gaze further deepens the discrepancy between mother and son and

everybody else. Ma's reaction is also very significant. On the one hand, she is embarrassed as she knows that what she is doing is against the unwritten rules of Western society (due to her son's age): "it is the age of the child being nursed and not the act of nursing itself that so troubles the readership . . . But this is itself problematic because it assumes a Western understanding of the proper age for nursing and weaning" (O'Reilly 142). On the other, while breastfeeding him, Ma embraces Jack tightly, which reflects on the act itself: it is both empowering and leaving the pair vulnerable.

The issue of breastfeeding provides the readers with further insight into the dynamics of mother and son and their relationship with the outside world. First, it reveals Ma's nurturing and self-sacrificing nature:

On the outside, this phenomenon seems strange to many, however, whilst in captivity it is a means to provide sustenance and comfort to her boy. Since she cannot procure food for Jack herself, and Old Nick is an unreliable source, the only way she can provide for Jack is by breastfeeding at the expense of her own body. The breastfeeding robs Ma of her already limited source of nutrients and, as a result, her teeth are decaying at an alarmingly rapid speed. Breastfeeding in Room can be seen as a symbol of Ma's motherly love and commitment to Jack. (Chi 41)

Second, breastfeeding empowers Ma as through it she gains control over her son's, and thus her own life, she regains some of the authority she lost when she was locked into the garden shed. Instead of being just a passive object of violent and brutal abuse, Ma becomes an active agent of her own narrative: "childbirth and associated bodily functions are conceived by [her] as writing, giving, constructing, performing, and engendering, thus, highly empowering experiences" (Lénárt-Muszka 354). Finally, not only does breastfeeding symbolize the strong connection between Ma and Jack but it also facilitates this very connection. As breastfeeding is not just "the physical act of nursing but [signifies] all dimensions of . . . [Ma's] motherlove" (O'Reilly 130), Ma's collapse when interviewed thus reveals an even greater depth of motherlove and mother-son bond than one would sense at first glance.

Conclusion

Inspired by the story of Elizabeth Fritzl who was kept in confinement by her own father in the basement of their house, Emma Donoghue's *Room* traces the life of Ma and Jack in a soundproof garden shed where Ma spends seven years of her life. After their escape, it is Ma who tries to raise awareness of the numerous cases like theirs, thus including her ordeal into the multitude of traumatic experiences, some considered exceptional, others quotidian. This is a double gesture on her part, namely she does away with the exclusivity of her story and, at the same time, draws attention upon those traumatic experiences that are generally not observed. Ma's son Jack, the young child born and raised in confinement, embodies fundamental human values of benevolence and universalism as his unique perspective is full of child's wonder and excitement. Jack makes sense of his entire world through a very distinct perspective, one that has something new to say about our world, about our reality, and about our relationships. The boy and his peculiar narrative voice stand in the center of the novel that, as it was shown in the paper, is grounded in dichotomies, which go beyond the novel's structuring device and ultimately reveal the interdependence between two contrastive issues: the inside gains new depth and meaning exactly at the moment when it is pitted against the outside, the dichotomy of real/imaginary proves to be as elusive as the interpretation of trauma itself.

The paper intended to bring to the fore a set of human values in Emma Donoghue's *Room* by focusing, on the one hand, on the afore-mentioned dichotomies and, on the other, on the phenomenon of alterity that is present both in Jack's interpretation of the world around him and, in an even more fascinating way, in himself as the central character of the novel. His peculiar connection to his mother, being the most expressive in the breastfeeding narrative line, was captured through Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject. Ultimately, it is exactly through alterity that the reader witnesses a new perspective on age-old values: basic human values that, through the five-year-old boy's eyes and narration, are central to the novel and to life itself.

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„BUDI OKRETAN JACK, BUDI BRZ JACK...“: NEOBIČAN ŽIVOT U ROMANU *SOBA* EMME DONOGHUE

Sažetak

Noémi ALBERT

Filozofski fakultet

Sveučilišta u Pečuhu

Iffjúság útja 6, H-7624 Pécs

noemi_albert@yahoo.com

Soba (2010.) Emma Donoghue roman je o majci i sinu zatočenima u zvučno izoliranom spremištu. Roman se bavi dihotomijom unutar/izvan prisutnoj npr. u sinovoj percepciji svijeta, zatočeništvu i bijegu, i dr. Ove dualnosti sastavni su dio romana – traume koje proživljavaju i Ma i Jack. Cilj je rada iščitavanje traume u narativnom prostoru romana, a obuhvaća detaljnu analizu neobične povezanosti majke i sina, dojenje petogodišnjaka u zatočeništvu te ulogu jezika u romanu. Analiza ovih elemenata pojasnit će ideju življenja utjelovljenu u likovima Ma i Jacka koja počiva na osnovnim ljudskim vrijednostima prisutnima u njihovim osobnostima i njihovoj povezanosti.

Ključne riječi: Emma Donoghue, *Soba*, trauma, silovanje, dijete, dojenje, unutar/izvan