TRAUMA, RESILIENCE & SURVIVAL INSIDE/OUTSIDE *ROOM*: A CRITICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Directed by Lenny Abrahamson and based upon Emma Donoghue's novel of the same name, Room (2015), was a life-affirming movie that depicted the beautiful strength of a mother-child relationship. Set amidst the background of forced incarceration and repeated sexual assault of the mother for seven years, the movie covered social, emotional, psychological and spatial aspects of dealing with isolation. Thus, the present paper explored the underpinnings of resilience as exhibited by Ma and Jack in their struggles to acclimate and survive both during and after their prolonged captivity. The paper argued that there was a disparity between their respective experiences in the room and the outside world due to the limited exposure to stimuli for the child and the inexplicable trauma of the mother. This dissonance, in turn, was marked by the issues of dissociation from surroundings, Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), negative sense of identity, reduced self-esteem and efficacy on the mother's part compared to the re-learning of the new environment, development of individual identity, navigation of social interactions and dynamics from scratch on Jack's part.

KEYWORDS: Resilience, Trauma, Mother-child relationship, Isolation, Coping

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INTRODUCTION

Imagine being cooped up in a place, with no outside contact, for a long duration of time. And the only way to ascertain the passing of time is via a wrist watch and a sliver of sunshine through a single window. During the lockdown period, various news reports have also resurfaced which have shown the increase in the cases of domestic violence as the perpetrator and the victim are forced to share the same space (Agarwal, 2020). *Room* (2015) is one such movie which re-imagines a pretty grim scenario of a mother-child duo, Ma and Jack, trapped in a similar situation who manage to escape their 11 feet by 11 feet enclosure called Room (capital R) and face personal struggles both inside and outside it. For many people, those who do not have telecom and internet connectivity, this situation has already come to pass with the recent Covid-19 crisis.

Room is directed by the highly acclaimed director Lenny Abrahamson and is based upon Emma Donoghue's novel (2010) of the same name, who has also written the screenplay of the movie. The movie narrates the story of human resilience and the indomitable spirit of survival within the context of psycho-sexual trauma, developmental milestones and post-crisis re-acclimatization to the outside world with utmost empathy. *Room* could be the story of any body and could take place anywhere that makes it very relatable on a deep personal level. This

paper has chosen to focus on the movie and not the novel in accordance with the belief that both movie and novel are distinct texts and can be analysed in a standalone manner. This idea is indebted to the theories of Adaptation in cinema studies which have done away with the concept of the “original” source that viewed cinema as mere mimetic performance and not being fit for attention as an independent medium (Hutcheon, 2006). Thus, the paper intends to explore the resilience, struggle, hardiness and plasticity illustrated in the context of enforced isolation and traumatic experiences of both Ma and Jack in the movie *Room*. The paper argues that there is a disparity between their respective experiences in the room due to the limited exposure to stimuli for the child and the inexplicable trauma of the mother. Similarly, there exists incongruity in their perspectives and approach towards adaptation in the outside world. This dissonance, in turn, is marked by the issues of dissociation from surroundings, Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), negative sense of identity, reduced self-esteem and efficacy on the mother’s part compared to the re-learning of the new environment, development of individual identity, navigation of social interactions and dynamics from scratch on Jack’s part. Further, different coping mechanisms utilized by the mother and the son, to conquer their personal adversities, have been identified and discussed. To achieve these objectives, the paper has been subdivided into three sub-sections that deal with each of these above mentioned issues, viz. Trauma and Isolation; Inside-Brink-Outside; and Resilience, Survival and Coping Mechanism.

TRAUMA AND ISOLATION

According to the American Psychiatric Association (2000), trauma can be defined as,

“Direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one’s physical integrity; or witnessing an event that involves death, injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of another person; or learning about unexpected or violent death, serious harm, or threat of death or injury experienced by a family member or other close associate.”

As a result, feelings of helplessness and fear often become the hallmarks (Spiegel, 2008). Sometimes, the experience of traumatic event is accompanied by feelings of isolation. In the opening shot, the camera-eye shows the mundane objects of the Room like table, chair, toilet, wardrobe etc. and then again in detail when Jack begins his daily routine by greeting every inanimate object with a friendly ‘Hi.’ These basic paraphernalia of the Room along with his made-up dog Lucky signify his only friends and his sense of belonging with this enclosed space. Jack, who was born in captivity, five years ago, has never seen or experienced the outside world and for him, everything exists on TV and is “not real.” The only real person that he knows and loves is his Ma whose real name, Joy Newsome, is revealed much later. Meanwhile Jack is content and happy to be in the Room with his favourite and only “real” person. His perception of “real” and “not real” is filtered through his Ma who weaves a self-sufficient world for him inside the Room itself. Thus, for Jack even if it is the only way in which he can perceive his world yet his isolation is understood by Ma and viewers that he is not getting the necessary conditions for optimal growth and development.

In contrast, for Ma, who had been captured at the age of 17 and repeatedly raped for past 7 years, Room is a stark reminder of her helpless situation, forced isolation from her family, and a daily confrontation with her attacker on whom they are heavily dependent for food, electricity and other essential items to live a bare minimum life. The narrative, in the form of Jack’s voice over, informs the viewers that for two years after her captivity, “Ma cried and cried and watched TV until she became a zombie.” One may say that she experiences “intrapsychic isolation” (Fisher, 2012) that turns her inwards into herself owing to being separated from her parents and with no affirmative social relationships or interaction in sight.

The effect of trauma can be seen in the disrupted thinking under stress of repeated sexual violence geared towards more immediate action rather long term consequences (Janis, 1982). She seems merely surviving her captivity for the sake of her son. With Jack's birth and his support, she finds a new sense of purpose in nurturing and protecting another being that makes her isolation somewhat bearable. Ma's mental anguish is at odds with the atmosphere of liveliness that she has to create for her young child every day. She has to pretend that she is okay and that the Room has everything that they need to live together.

However, even then, there are some unbearable "Gone Days" where Ma emotionally withdraws from Jack and keeps on crying the entire day. At other times Ma shouts at the skylight and Jack joins her by shouting at air vents in hope that someone might hear their cries for help some day. This also serves another purpose by becoming an outlet for venting of her frustration and anger in absence of companionship and lack of adult conversation with anyone else apart from Jack. Ma is in a difficult state and space where she cannot get away from her child for personal time even if she wants to. And she cannot do that either because without her, Jack would literally have nobody to talk to. The constant grappling of the efforts to assimilate how the sexual violence and captivity affects her entire being can be seen (Miller et al., 2010). However, this trauma is not limited to inside the Room, but extends and expands in the outside world for both Ma and Jack.

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 had nightmares, bed-wetting is a sign of their mental anguish. This nocturnal enuresis clearly indicates the anxiety and immense stress felt by him in the outside world (Salehi et al., 2016). He not only has to get accustomed to the idea that the outside world is lot bigger than he had been told about but 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 the familiar surroundings.

Similarly, Ma feels disconnected with her surroundings because her childhood home and the relations within that space that 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, depersonalization and lessened reactivity (Nöthling et al., 2016). She views her incarceration in a different light than before as she feels that life has moved on for everybody in positive direction apart from hers. She grapples with Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), negative sense of identity, reduced self-esteem and efficacy in her former safe haven. She also lashes at her mother Nancy and blames her for teaching her to "be good" to strangers, which landed her in incarceration by Old Nick. It's possible that Ma's repeated exposure to danger eliciting her flight/fight response may have led to hyperarousal which was proving to be a detriment in adaptation to her 'old' life (Bloom, 2003).

Her behaviour is also consistent with how trauma victims react in similar situations. According to Kennedy and Prock (2018),

"Child sexual abuse (CSA), sexual assault (SA), and intimate partner violence (IPV) occur within social contexts that shape how survivors judge themselves and are evaluated by others. Because these are gendered sexual and intimate crimes that violate social norms about what is appropriate and acceptable, survivors may experience stigma that includes victim blaming from the broader society as well as stigmatizing reactions from others in response to disclosure."

Thus, outside the Room, Ma's latent aggression comes to the fore which makes her vulnerable and headstrong in front of others. She wants to prove to the world that there is nothing wrong with Jack and feels personally attacked whenever anybody tries to give her any advice, even with good intention. She displaces her latent anger and frustration on both Jack and Nancy. This disjunction in adequate emotional regulation, behaviour, thinking pattern and personality is often found to be part of prolonged impact of sexual abuse (Manigilio, 2009).

INSIDE-BRINK-OUTSIDE

Jack, who has always been kept away from the knowledge of his biological father by Ma, imagines Old Nick as a strange and evil child-harming monster. Every night, when Old Nick comes at 9 o'clock sharp, Jack has to forcibly sleep in his tiny wardrobe and listen to the creaking of the bed or their meagre conversation. Being too young and hidden from the view, Jack is unaware of the significance of the creaking bed which refers to repeated rape of the mother by her abductor, each night.

For Jack, the persona of the Old Nick is surrounded by a sense of wonder and bewilderment and from his doubly-enclosed space of the wardrobe, he wonders if Old Nick is a monster, half-real, or a wizard who brings them food and other items of necessity by magic. Jack is naturally intuitive and imaginative child who supplements the lack of information in his life by weaving stories and contexts for the same. That is also how he guesses when his mother needs space and when she needs to be comforted.

However, his only accidental encounter with Old Nick, which is fiercely resisted by Ma, ends up with her choking and extreme sense of guilt on Jack's part. For the first time in his life, he senses the raw power of terror and immobility that another person can wreak in their little haven. This episode also acts as a breaking point or brink for Ma for she finally acknowledges that she cannot always turn Old Nick's anger on herself. Eventually he would manage to harm Jack physically as well as mentally. This realization is important on Ma's part because the price of denial from this point onwards might even cost Jack's life. It may be possible that this incident pushed her to find a way out of the learned helplessness resulting from trauma (Kelley, 1986).

Thus, the journey from the inside to the outside is mediated with this "brink" where even Jack has to leave his cocooned existence and face the new reality with which his mother acquaints him forcefully and almost mercilessly. O'Reilly (2017) has seen the motif of the Room as a womb which has kept Jack safe and secure from the world outside but now after being pushed out of that comforting and limiting space, Jack has to navigate the world on his own.

Therefore, in the outside world, Jack is benumbed with too many stimuli that have been bombarded at him after his escape. From new people to new spaces like police car, hospital, his grandmother's place, it is an explosion of new influences. In his significant voice over he says that he has merely been in the world for nineteen hours but he has experienced a lot of bewildering things.

However, Jack is still unable to communicate his feelings directly to other people and only talks to his mother in whispers. He voices his desires and concerns through his mother not because he is shy but because he has only met other "real" humans a short while ago, having been told and believed that they only exist on TV.

On the other spectrum, for Ma, her former identity as the abducted and raped Joy Newsome is at crossroads with her new identity as the mother of Jack. In struggle for clarification of personal identity and social identity (Tajfel & Turner,

1979) in her new circumstances, she flounders to find a footing. Her social and mental isolation and PTSD reach the lowest point when the news reporter insinuates that she was a selfish mother who did not let Jack leave the Room when he was born so that he could have a normal childhood. This final act pushes Joy off the “brink” where she wants to sever the connection with the outside world, by attempting suicide.

RESILIENCE, SURVIVAL AND COPING MECHANISM

According to the American Psychological Association (APA),

"Psychologists define resilience as the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress — such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stressors. As much as resilience involves "bouncing back" from these difficult experiences, it can also involve profound personal growth" (APA, 2020)

In the movie *Room* both Ma and Jack acclimate and adapt to their changing contexts. Theirs is a mutually dependent and nourishing relationship that provides strength to each other. Early on, Ma gives Jack the mantra of “Mind over Matter.” She tells him, “*If we don't mind, it doesn't matter.*” They can survive with bare minimum items and actual physical pain in Ma’s case (tooth-ache and wrist injury) by not thinking too much about the problem. Over the years, it has been suggested that mind over matter is an essential part of healthy living (Sydoruk, 2018). In this context, it may also be thought of as a component of resilience, that is, to persevere with determination even when it hurts the most.

Coping flexibility is a construct that involves using different coping behaviours in different circumstances (Bonanno et al., 2011). In this movie as well, Ma takes utmost precaution to keep Jack healthy, nourished and entertained by devising various interesting games, mental exercises, giving him vitamin tablets, breast feeding him, satisfying his natural curiosity about the “outside Space” with best possible answer and teaching-learning activities. Cooped up in this small 11 feet by 11 feet room, the entire world shrinks into a tiny space for Ma and Jack which can be a very frustrating experience for many people. But to combat the feeling of drudgery and boredom, Ma devises a detailed routine for both Jack and herself. This routine is important for it infuses a sense of “normal” in this extraordinary situation. It also enables Ma to feel alive with her child. These momentary episodes of happiness as well as those difficult instances where Jack, being a five years old child, is naturally inquisitive about his surroundings, show their resilience in the face of the adversity of their captivity. Thus, games, stories and routine become the coping strategies. Nijhof et al (2018) have suggested that self managed mechanisms such as play and storytelling help in promoting resilience, emotional and social capabilities in children.

In her stance to protect Jack and continue to go on, she fights against the stigma often attached to sexual abuse survivors and children borne from it (Carpenter, 2007). Ma fiercely faces her own father Robert and media by insisting that Jack is her child and nobody else’s. She challenges the sense of shame that her father feels by the presence of Jack in the room. As far as Jack is concerned, she refuses to let society ascribe any labels on him or morally judge his existence as a “child borne out of rape.” Thus, even though she is rendered vulnerable in the outside world yet her love for her son does not diminish.

Similarly, Jack is naturally protective of his mother and helps the police in tracing her. Although initially incredulous and saying that he “hates” Ma for telling him a disturbing story of her abduction, he makes an attempt to

understand her. His acceptance, although precipitated by Ma's momentary emotional withdrawal, is nonetheless a brave act for a five years old child. He makes a great leap of faith for Ma's sake to save her from Old Nick's fury, after his escape. Even the doctor acknowledges that Jack is still plastic, which signifies that he is malleable and can adapt to the changed circumstances with enough time and patience.

He gradually learns to cope with the life-changing situation and makes friends with individuals other than his mother. Perhaps it is the plasticity of the young mind that allows him to reorder and reorganise his thoughts and perspectives at a faster rate and adapt (Nava & Roeder, 2011). However, the greatest test of their bond comes when Jack sacrifices his long hair and gives it to Ma who is hospitalised after her failed suicide attempt. For Jack who believed in the biblical story of Samson, his hair was a source of strength to him, until he thought his mother needed it more than him. Thus, the incredible mother-child relationship becomes a source of resilience for both of them.

The availability of a good support system during the aftermath of trauma plays important role in recovery and the pace at which individuals would heal (Olf, 2018). Grandmother Nancy and her partner Leo whole heartedly accept them and try to understand their predicament with utmost empathy. Unlike Robert, Nancy and Leo make Jack feel at home with the new space and world. To this effect, Leo introduces his dog Seamus to Jack to fulfil the latter's dream of befriending a dog someday. Joy's agreement to seek help in the form of therapy to deal with the trauma also shows her determination to take control of her life, find purpose and move on from clutches of the past.

Another step towards future indicating resilience that occurs is when both Ma and Jack revisit the Room for one last time. Now bereft of the familiar items and having experienced the outside world, the Room seems to have shrunk for Jack. He remarks that "it is because the door is open." This deconstructs the larger than life Room as an ordinary shed which is not enough to house them anymore. This final visit may have acted as exposure therapy to face it and move on (Rothbaum & Foa, 1999). Jack is able to say goodbye to the room and its contents one last time and so does Joy. Their ability to say the final goodbye shows that they have embarked on the journey of healing and moving beyond the respective traumas.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the movie *Room* depicts the strength and power of a mutually-supportive mother-child relationship that helps both Ma and Jack in transcending even the worst of abuses. Through their mutual love and care, they are able to heal each other and grow out of their respective traumas. Thus, despite their disparate experiences in an enclosed shed, with equally distinct ramifications post-escape, the movie successfully manages to capture and illustrate the tenacity, hardiness and plasticity in the context of enforced isolation, sexual violence, and traumatic experiences. The movie also delivers the final hope of healing, human resilience, and survival in a sensitive manner.

Moreover, one can discern a pattern of isolation and trauma that has been depicted in the movie and see the similarities with the on-going crisis of Covid-19. Trauma can come in any form, one cannot judge or label what constitutes 'minor' trauma or 'major' trauma rather it is the individual experiencing it who needs to be supported and aided to deal with the umbrage of feelings to see him/her safely through that phase.

Though the isolation due to the pandemic cannot be compared to Ma and Jack's incarceration at all yet, one can learn the lesson of resilience that the movie puts across. The inability to connect, psycho-social withdrawal due to physical distancing has not only affected relationship at home and at work but it has also challenged the very definition of personal

space. To persevere in these times needs radical reorganisation and acclimatisation to the “new normal.” Just like Ma and Jack innovated to tide over their experiences inside the room and braved the new changed world in their own ways, people will have to unlearn the familiar and focus on navigating the unknown.

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