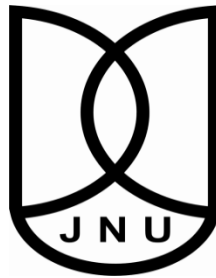


**Mothering in a Dysfunctional Space:
A Comparative Study of Colm Toibin's *The Blackwater
Lightship* and Emma Donoghue's *Room***

*Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University
in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the
award of the degree of*

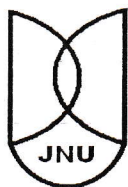
MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

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2016



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Date: July 21, 2016.

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Introduction

The meanings attributed to a certain environment enclosed within a space in this case, are regulated by implicit codes and conventions such as behaviour protocols of the inmates. The study deals with the private connotations of space rather than external or public. Domestic space is characterised by domestic practices of domestic beings around domestic objects. Therefore an analysis of the meaning and use of such space ought to distinguish spaces, occupants and activities therein, from typical features which infuse meaning to the same. The understanding aforesaid is precisely in the view of an urban social setup, given the context of representation in the concerned texts.

The work analyses relationships between subjects through probing into individual characters. It seeks to examine the nature of conflict within the self and beyond, that have rendered an accumulative essence to the respective domestic spaces. Such essence appears to originate in one's practical as well as imaginative experience in the given environments. Thus, a psychological reading becomes imperative to a juxtaposition where sentimentality and nostalgia are at constant play.

This work proposes to examine the significance of the domestic space in the act of mothering/motherhood, in the light of *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999) and *Room* (2010). To understand what makes such a space dysfunctional, we would first look into what renders sentimentality and belongingness to the same. The selection of these two novels is based on their contemporariness and Irish ethnicity of their authors. This work will also try to trace whether the two novels have an affinity to Irish themes and motifs.

The Blackwater Lightship is about scarce peace after years of dispute among three generations of women from the same family - Helen, a young married woman, her mother Lily and the grandmother, Dora. They are compelled to live together in a crumbling old house in Wexford in order to nurse Helen's brother, Declan. Declan is suffering from AIDS and is in his last days. Declan is also attended by his two friends who are gay and sincerely caring. The book is neither a story of homosexuality by default nor traditionally Irish in terms of stereotypical themes, political or domestic. The novel was also adapted into a movie under the same name under the direction of John Erman. It was released on February 4, 2004.

Room by Emma Donoghue is narrated by a five year old Jack who lives with *Ma* in an 11x11foot room that contains a small kitchen, a bathtub, a wardrobe, a bed and a TV. Jack believes that the room along with all its components that include *Ma* and himself, are the only real things. The rest of the world that Jack sees on the television, are fiction for him. This is the story *Ma* tells him to make peace with the unbearable captivity of her son and herself. Jack is unaware that Old Nick kidnapped *Ma* and has kept her imprisoned in Room for the past seven years. Jack is the product of Old Nick's rape of *Ma*. In a successful attempt at freeing her son from the room, the two escape from the room and are taken care of, in a mental hospital until recuperation. The new world and its experiences are baffling especially for Jack. Donoghue had composed this work after hearing about the Fritzl crime scene in Austria. *Room* (2010) has been adapted into a film whose screenplay was written by Donoghue herself even before the book was published. The film had its world premiere on September 4, 2015 and was widely released on October 16, 2015. It has acquired critical acclaim from critics and won itself numerous nominations and awards. Directed by Lenny Abrahamson and produced by Donoghue, the film was called on of the best of 2015 by critics and publications. Jacob Trembley playing 'Jack' and Brie Larson as 'Ma' have been credited with accolades for brilliant performances. Brie Larson won the Academy Award for 'Best Actress' in 2016.

Colm Toibin who hails from Wexford in Ireland and Emma Donoghue, an Irish born writer who later became a citizen of Canada, are contemporary writers. Both the aforementioned works throw light on the conditions of mothering, its aspects, circumstances and nurturing as a parent. The mothering as an act and the mother figures instead of the characters as mothers per se, is interesting and very differently put across in the storylines. For instance, Declan seems to be nurtured by his friends in suffering and distress, way better than his mother, 'Lily' ever did. The friends, Paul and Larry in this case become the mother figures. Alongside, *Ma* becomes for Jack, more than a mother figure. She is every other family member, friend or acquaintance personified in Jack's life. Moving on from the extra ordinary figures, we come across a certain platform where these figures play their respective roles. This platform is the domestic space that renders freedom and curbs the same. It turns out that this space and condition of the act of mothering is a dysfunctional one. The dysfunctional space is in fact the family. This family is a domestic space that stands in contrast to traditional ideas of a family especially in the Irish context. The

domestic space that may have seen rebellion and transgression in previous customary family unit, is outgrown by these two set ups in *The Blackwater Lightship* and *Room*.

The scenes of conflict in terms of orientation of a regular family, and the relationship of its members, resonate metaphorically in suggestion of distinct realms. These are the social issues surrounding modern and post modern changes, generation gaps, personal autonomy and traditional kinship claims. It would usher into an understanding of the legacy of silence especially in relation to sexuality and physicality. They may have something to express in terms of Irish Background since their authors are contemporary writers of Irish origin.

Both writers have an evident stance on their respective sexual orientation in their works. Each one's homosexuality is explicitly expressed and applauded in their works e.g. Colm Toibin's *The Story of the Night*, *Love in a Dark Time: Gay Lives from Wilde to Almodovar* and Donoghue's *Lesbian Love Stories*, *Inseparable: Desire between Women*, *Stir-Fry* etc. However, the novels I am going to study do not exclusively underline sexuality or homosexuality. Perhaps these stand just in line with other issues, like that of the domestic, the family, internal and external conflicts, of the past and the present. Both works do not necessarily speak of the woman/women in celebratory tones per se. However the flattening and fading of male characters essentially the father figure definitely alters patriarchy in its own way. This in fact further sets the tone for the topic or title i.e. 'Mothering'.

In *The Blackwater Lightship*, the father dies and Declan is suffering from AIDS. The three generations of women seem to be sorting their problems in the story. In *Room*, Old Nick is just one of the other elements/characters in the young narrator's voice. Despite being the root of all evils, he seems to be deliberately sidelined from the centre.

The idea of 'Mothering' and conditions of nurturing along with the importance, psyche, presence, absence and role reversals of the concerned mother figures stand out in both the works. The mothers in specific, in both novels are of very different and contrast kinds. The conditions are similar in the sense that both are dysfunctional yet, of different kinds. Each in some sense is about the parent-child relationship. The mother as a parent and the mother versus the parent should be eventually scrutinised in this study.

The 'Dysfunctional Space' in these works may in fact be seen as literal and symbolic. The space is of the domestic sphere as a family. A crumbling house by the sea in *The Blackwater Lightship* and an 11x11 foot room in *Room* brings up coexisting conflicts and linearities. The space in both stories has an absent father. Also, it is too cramped for its residents' comfort and privacy. The symbolic significance of the enclosed as opposed to the outside is also a matter of interest. *Room* basically has no outside, if it does, it is dangerous and threatening. *The Blackwater Lightship* has beautiful landscape with the sea and mountains and sloping roads etc.

There are various other themes that I intend to bring out analytically with the study of these two works of fiction such as Battle for space, a sense of existentialism, learning and unlearning, suffering, craving/reaching out for freedom, breakdown of family, personal resilience and adaptability, the sensational and the mundane, the dark and the light. The idea of family is problematized along with the family itself.

Colm Toibin and Emma Donoghue are contemporary authors of the Irish origin. Toibin's works have been critically viewed under the lens of Irish past, pre independence, colonial and post nationalist discourses etc. For instance, '*The interstitial status of Irish gayness in Colm Toibin's The Blackwater Lightship and The Master*' by M. Jose Yebra. (Estudios Irlandeses - Journal of Irish Studies. Annual, 2014 Issue 9, p96, 11 p.); '*The Endless Mutation of the Shore: Colm Toibin's Marine imaginary*' by Liam Harte (*Critique*. Summer 2010, Vol. 51 Issue 4) etc are critical works on Toibin's writing. However, *Room* does not have much critique so far apart from reviews and interviews with Donoghue. Also the eminent sexual orientations in Toibin's and Donoghue's person as well as literary career have led to quite some homosexual and homoerotic discourses. However, there is deficit in existing scholarship on the domestic aspect in the works of these two writers.

Probing into the fluidity of relationships in the domestic space of each plot of the very different and still relative two works, would perhaps contribute to an understanding of the rudimentary elements in the family and society. Delving into characters and their relationships with simultaneous references would also help shift the focus from a reductionist viewpoint on Colm Toibin and Emma Donoghue's works. The gay identities often accorded to them is definitely not a central approach, however will remain one of the sub themes in consideration. The 'domestic space' is more of an interest for a vantage point from which to understand the mother figure as

such. The links among narration, power and representation in *The Blackwater Lightship* and *Room* are unobtrusive yet severely engaging. Modern day work of literary fiction is subject to a critical understanding through the lens of domesticity by scholars like Chiara Briganti, Kathy Mezei, Cynthia Wall, Diana Fuss, Supria Chadhuri, Homi Bhabha and so on. *The Domestic Space Reader* by Briganti and Mezei introduces the idea of home in its complex nature by stating:

“...And once we bring out into the open what we discover is its strikingly adaptive and resilient quality, its ability to be shelter and labyrinth, vessel of desire and terror, Le Corbusier’s ‘machine for living’ and the surrealist’s ‘convulsive theatre of the domestic’ (Introduction, 6)¹.

Introducing Colm Toibin’s *The Blackwater Lightship* and Emma Donoghue’s *Room*, the first portion deals with Fiction and contemporary writing. It would also study the socio-cultural context of their composition.

It will analyse the idea of domestic space and its becoming of a dysfunctional one. The conceptualization of a conventional family and its features render a certain place and role to the mother. The relationship of the mother with other family members, especially her children is brought out. The relationships can be critically viewed in the light of family as a traditional cultural and political institution. The second chapter applies the preceding discussion to understand the dysfunctional in *The Blackwater Lightship* and *Room*. It will basically render a psychoanalytic reading and comprehension of the narration. The third chapter would deal with the limitations and transgressions of domestic lives. The next chapter should conclude all the aforementioned discourses with the lineage of learning, unlearning and re-learning. As an ensemble of the critical understanding of relationships in the domestic arena, the act of mothering in dysfunctional circumstances should be brought out in *The Blackwater Lightship* and *Room*.

“Negotiating Space in the Family Home” is an essay in *At Home: An Anthropology of Domestic Space* wherein Moira Munro and Ruth Madigan talk about the relationship between domestic space and forming identities proposing that:

The concept of ‘home’ embraces both a physical and a social space;
the house itself is home, as are the social relations contained within it.

¹ Introduction, *The Domestic Space Reader* (University of Toronto Press, 2012).

The concept of 'home' also carries a heavy ideological burden ... it can be seen as part of an ideological trinity: 'family,' 'home,' and 'community'. Ideas of what constitutes a "proper" family have shaped the ways in which individuals relate to one another in the intimacy of their domestic life, and the same ideas have influenced the physical design of the housing within which these social relationships are lived. The home thus provides an important *locale* within which individuals negotiate their daily lives... (174).

Social conventions and expectations reinforce networking that creates stable patterns of behaviour and identity. Thus, the stability of experiences at home depends on the stability of perceived subjectivity. The secure boundary of home which distinguishes the inside from the outside offers a sense of discrete security. When this secure idea of the space seems threatened by an internal or external factor, it alters one's experience of the space. This in turn, questions the upheld conventions and expectations. The moment of loss and displacement creates a drift in the understanding of what we call home and its domestic space. The relations of the inmates thus affected also alter our understanding of individual subjectivity and identity formation.

The characters that suffer in the disintegration of family home in fiction are often women and children. The state of domestic displacement ubiquitously affects the more vulnerable occupants of such a space which mostly turns out to be children and mothers as their accomplice. The idea of destruction of home in either cases of physical or emotional abandonment affects one's identity especially if it has been the site of one's upbringing and childhood memories. Mildred Mortimer quotes Yi Fu Tuan from *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* as:

Home is an intimate place. We *think* of the house as home and place, but enchanted images of the past are evoked not so much by the entire building, which can only be seen, as by its components and furnishings, which can be touched and smelled as well: the attic and the cellar, the fireplace and the bay window, the hidden corners, a stool, a gilded mirror, a chipped

shell (Introduction, 17)² (Yi Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* 144).

Tuan hereby suggests a connection between our assorted memories of home with our experience of its space. This perhaps implies the delicate transitioning of a house into home. The inanimate objects occupying space along with the human presence render a collective sensory attachment. The interiors, furnishing, wardrobes and clothes may individually evoke feelings not because they are valuables but because they have memories attached. The collective spirit of the space that resides within comes from the association of the inanimate objects with the life and charm of the loved ones around.

The social and cultural expectations that have been a part of a particular domestic order of one dwelling may not easily traverse to a new place. The relocation of home to another can reveal the foundation of the conventions and challenge their legitimacy. New spaces make room for new patterns of behaviour to be established. The dispossession of home may be affected by the turbulence in its domestic space. The detachment may turn out to be devastating at first and eventually liberating with the acquiring of potent redefinitions. It requires imagination and courage to let go of the past to recreate and relocate the lost identities. The lack of vision and acceptance of the new roles in the new space may cause disruption of identity. As in the case of *The Blackwater Lightship* and *Room*, we see their temporary bereavement of characters in dealing with the given crisis. The characters appear in a liminal space of transition from their previous patterns of dwelling.

² Mildred Mortimer in his book *Writing from The Hearth: public, domestic and imaginative space in francophone women's fiction of Africa and the Caribbean* notes Yi Fu Tuan's words in *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (p.144) highlights the collective essence of components of home.

Chapter- 1

From Domestic to Dysfunctional Space

This chapter intends to study the representation of domestic spaces in contemporary fiction in as much as it determines the place and the role of the mother in relation to other family members especially her children. The relationships can be critically viewed in the light of family as a traditional, cultural and political institution.

To understand Mothering in a domestic space, a trajectory for its analysis should precede. This entails addressing what we commonly understand as a domestic space, the occupants of it. This would lead to an understanding of how it may become dysfunctional. The deviance from a conceptual rendering of domestic space transforms the very space into a dysfunctional one. The space becoming dysfunctional goes through a transition and stands out from the functional ones. The aspects that lead to a space thus becoming dysfunctional, point towards the relationships involved and their equilibrium. From the concepts of home and family, the act of mothering is traced and studied to offer an understanding of circumstantial deviance.

Domestic space is synonymous with and representative of the containment of what we understand as Home, Family, House and the dynamics of the inmates. The dynamic builds up from elements such as conversation between the inmates, patterns of gestures and behaviours, of solitary contemplation, daily chores of collective and individual nature, events and gatherings to commemorate occasions, bland impersonal exchanges to heated and indulged discussions and the complexities of the same. It holds the importance of a 'community'. Definitely, there are ancestral, biological and hereditary connotations in a traditional family. This traditional form has more often than not been a patriarchal structure, with the father as the head and mother as his accomplice in forming the upcoming generation.

Since both the texts *Room* and *The Blackwater Lightship* fall under Contemporary fiction and are written by Irish born authors, we can observe the domestic space in Irish context, even though the plot of *Room* is set in America.

'Marriage' has been divisive as an institution in rendering meaning and value to the idea of family.³ From our observations of everyday lives and norms of the

³ Jonathan Williams in "Law and Private life in the Republic" , *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* in 3rd para. of the 1937 Constitution of the Republic of Ireland shows the State's conviction in guarding marriage and refraining from any form of its dissolution.

society, the general understanding of a family comprises parents and children. It may extend to incorporate grandparents or/and cousins or/and other relatives in the more traditional form of dwelling. It is usually headed by the father or mother or both subjectively. The bearing of children carries the hereditary lineage of the parents. Thus, a family is founded on the conjugal relationship of two people. In patriarchal constructs, we can see linearity in the conduct of marriage, family, the role of members of the family along with the roots of hetero-normativity. The regulation of the women's roles in the family has been based on the 1937 Irish Free State Constitution, as the following quotation illustrates:

The state, therefore, guarantees to protect family in its constitution and authority, as the necessary basis of social order and as indispensable to the welfare of the nation and the state. In particular, the state recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the state a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. The state shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home. The State pledges itself to guard with special care the institution of marriage, on which the family is founded, and to protect it against attack. No law shall be enacted providing for the grant of a dissolution of marriage. (Williams, 330)⁴

Such narrative of nationhood locates the prosperity of the nation in its own definition of the family. Alongside, it mentions the role of women within confinement in the form of apparent designated responsibilities. Various legislative and constitutional imperatives hampered the individual growth of the woman for instance- Church led campaigns against heterosexual friendships, sexual repression, the 1929 British censorship act prohibiting contraception and abortion, and divorce becoming illegal along with domicile laws supporting the husbands. The laws protected the idea of the family however it deprived the mother of any individual sense of security and standing. In such parallel notions of nationhood and motherhood, the deified versions of both entities instill a sense of reverence toward them; however ironically end up being exploited as resources at disposal. Providence, unconditional love, endless

⁴ Jonathan Williams in "Law and Private life in the Republic" in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, has reproduced words from Article 41, paragraph 2 and 3 of the 1937 Constitution of the Republic of Ireland

nurturing, sacrifice, selfless devotion are values prerequisite to the becoming of such ‘-hood’ (motherhood). However, through the twentieth century in Irish writing, there has been a range of changes in terms of cultural and political representation and identity of the mother and the act of motherhood/ the process of mothering. Literary representation of the transition can be accorded to pioneering movements such as the ‘Irish Housewives’ Association’ of 1942 and ‘Irish Countrywomen’s Association’ followed by the ‘Irish Women’s Liberation Movement’ in the 1970s. The regressive laws began to be revoked by the 1980s. Anti homosexual legislation was redressed and civil divorce legalised in the 1990s. Such flow of movements transcended the previously posited ideals of family and more so the perception of Women along with that of the mother.

Irish artists and intellectuals have frequently subverted such ideas about family and society. In dealing with Contemporary Irish fiction, one sees the identity and role of the mother in various lights. Critical essays and readings render a distinct theoretical understanding to the entity. Each of them is only a consecutive junction in the flow of the thread. Starting from the Catholic Church’s adulation of the Virgin Mary and the Constitution, to a transitioning political, cultural and social standing it can be traced down to recent times. Also, the domestic space that contains the dynamics and networking of various members can be seen to alter back and forth. Since one cannot stick to a particular definition of the family and home, its subjectivity has to be eminently considered. Through characteristic features and components of thus an evolving concept, a drift can be observed. We can deduce to the making and acceptance of what one calls family, more precisely a ‘domestic space’.

The works dealing with family and mothers in Irish fiction talk specifically about mother-daughter relationships, mother- son relationships, plight of women and mothers, individual and collective journey and transcendence of females, homosexual and homoerotic binaries or ideas or concepts.

The term ‘domestic space’ is of importance in the given context for its untraditional aspect. *Room* and *The Blackwater Lightship* swerve from the functional course of the idea of family. Here, the domestic space with such divergence becomes a prime platform. It serves as a vantage point/podium to study the mother, mothering and the act of motherhood. In *Room*, the physical dimension of the domestic space is an eleven by eleven foot room that contains a small kitchen, a bathtub, a wardrobe, a

bed and a television. It sustains a family of two- Jack and Ma. The two are actually hostage of Old Nick. *The Blackwater Lightship* presents to us, Dora's house in Wexford (Ireland) where the scalding dynamics are rekindled due to circumstances. The subsumed emotions of years with ambiguous prejudices seem to simmer and subside like the waves in the sea. Jose Maria Yebra discusses the issues in Toibin's novel mentioning:

The iconography of the country as a maternal nurturing scenario ravished by British imperialism has religious and pagan connotations. Being Celtic and Catholic, against Norman-Saxon and Anglican England, Ireland has mothered generations subjected to foreign rule. Tóibín goes beyond Revisionism, though. Ireland cannot blame colonization for all its internal clashes and problems. British imperialism has obviously determined Irish history and collective memory. Nevertheless, *The Blackwater Lightship* addresses other issues, individual, affective, unfathomable, "too sharp and too deeply embedded" for the men (unlike for the women) in the novel "to fathom" (Yebra, 128)⁵.

In *Love in a Dark Time* (2001), Colm Toibin asserts, "Irish writing seems at its most content where there is a dead father or a dead child and domestic chaos (26)". Besides the conventional idea of the family, the complexities of its functioning and sustenance cannot be sidelined. It harbours relationships among its various members depending on the extent of the family in context. As much as it can be critiqued from a vantage point, the sentimental and emotional aspects stay intact. Its socio-political side needs to be addressed nonetheless. Of something that has been institutionalised over time, the experiences of each member render sentimentality to the same. It helps us understand the subject under an anthropological lens. This is precisely the junction that *The Blackwater Lightship* seems in sync with *Room*. The absence of the father complicates the functional aspect of 'family'. In *The Blackwater Lightship* the death of Michael Breen (Helen and Declan's father) triggers the harmony deficit in the family, especially in his daughter's mind. It may not have been the occurrence of his death exactly as much as the connected incidents that preceded and followed

⁵ Jose Maria Yebra, Transgenerational and Intergenerational Family Trauma in Colm Toibin's *The Blackwater Lightship* and "Three Friends".

thereafter. Similarly *Room* signifying Jack's room and his world, did not know of his father. Biologically or otherwise he did not have a male figure to look up to as do most children, his age. It is the mothers in both cases that have looked after the children as single parents in the absence of the father. *Ma*, in *Room* is not just the two parents combined for Jack, she covers for Jack's grandparents, relatives and friends that he may have had in the world outside. The tricky aspect of the thread is that Jack did not know of the lack of his father. The fact may have been hard on his mother, to know of everything, to suffer from the indelible and raise her child happy and content in absurd conditions. The mothering in this case is much more than the idea of a mother catering to the needs of her child with unconditional love. In *The Blackwater Lightship*, Lily seems to be dealing with a strange emptiness after her husband's death that only widened the gap between her and Helen. Perhaps, Lily was as vulnerable after being through the entire process of looking after her husband, being with him and watching him fade into nothingness. It had gone on for months, away from the children, away from the family. She mentions to Lily later in the text (241), of "a world of their own" that she and her husband had started to share during his treatment in the hospital in Dublin. Not to belittle the malleability and vulnerability of a child that Helen had after her father's death, Lily somewhere was fastened into her own despair. Evidently, it cost her dearly in the long run. Besides the single parenthood that the text may be referring to, 'homosexual parenthood' comes up beautifully. Paul and Larry seem to comfort Declan with such ease that it puts his biological family to shame. From the time that Declan was living on his own and had not met with his folks for a while, it was his gay friends he was constantly in touch with. When he was detected with AIDS, it was this alternate family that looked after him. Even as Declan reconciles with his own family, it is Larry and Paul that constantly hang around and clean his vomit and diarrhoea. He is most comfortable around them. We see Larry and Paul in the act of mothering when Declan is most vulnerable in his life.

The Blackwater Lightship, published in 1999, is set in 1993, the year when homosexuality was revoked in Ireland. When Helen is informed about Declan's fatal disease, she comes to realise that "Declan ... had replaced his family with his friends" (p.34). One of those friends is Paul, who has constantly attended to Declan accompanying him to the hospital and taking care of him. More than the physical help, he has offered Declan the love and emotional support in dire need. In Brussels, Paul and François often received the visits of Declan, who "was like a small boy, and

he'd talk and doze and play with our feet. "François always joked about adopting him" (p.174). In his review, critic Terry Eagleton has referred to *The Blackwater Lightship* as a novel about mothering where "the most proficient at the task turn out to be a couple of homosexual men" (1999). Toibin seems to be defending the legitimacy of homosexual parenthood that is otherwise still judged in many a place, community and nation. The diversion from traditional conventions in the text appears on many levels with sexuality and homosexual parenthood as one of them.

Toibin's fiction seems to imply a sense of post nationalist literary perspective in Ireland. From the ideals of nationhood and its symbol in the narratives of motherhood, the validations of the past are scrutinised. The righteous authority of previously "sacred" texts of Irish nationhood, such as the Constitution and the dogmas of the Catholic Church are challenged by such writings. It leads to bringing forth of the marginal ideologies to the mainstream discourse. Colm Tóibín has frequently revisited topics such as: history, migration and exile, home and family, gay identities and the transgression of gender imperatives. In his fiction one can frequently see anomalous identities that may have been traditionally marginalised, outcast or recurrently stereotyped. In this sense, the politics that the author seems to advocate is that, for Ireland to be pluralist and tolerant, its society should develop an understanding of the conditions of the silenced other. *Room* on the other hand is set in America and may not necessarily exude an Irish-ness in the issues it deals with. Inspired by a tragic occurrence that took place in Austria, *Room* is a captivating narration by a captive.

The concept of family in Ireland has been considered for generations, a social institution regulated by Law and moral discourses. It has been subverted by an alternate discourse that lays more importance on ambivalence than certainty. The liminal spaces come to the forefront in every possible way and at every possible level. It goes on to set an alternative definition and understanding of the family rather than merely relying on the genealogical discourse. The domestic spaces are of prime importance in deconstructing canonical definition of something that lies too close in human life for an outsider's definition of the same. The author's repeated characterization of the traditional family as distant or dysfunctional may put an emphasis on his effort to demonstrate that the values that this social institution is said to protect can be present in myriad forms that differ from the privileged one. Kinship related by blood is only one of the various elements that lay the foundations of deep

rooted human relationships. In the given fictions, the idea of home seems to be fluid in nature. It is perhaps an evolving subject that needs to be viewed with an open mind.

Both works begin on a similar account in terms of the mother attending to her child's (son) insecurities. Helen wakes up to calm Manus (younger son) who seemed to have been struggling in his dream. In *Room*, Ma tells Jack how the numbers did not exist before he "zoomed down". She was responding to his queries on whether his age receded from the number system before he was born. The two, are rather ordinary instances of day to day lives of a mother-child relationship. A child is constantly curious and fighting insecurities. The only thing that comforts him/her is the soothing touch of the mother or her reassuring words. However, as we go on with both texts, we see those roles getting more complex. *The Blackwater Lightship* may have three generations of mothers but the central mother-child relationship can be seen between Lily and Helen.

Since the title of this paper mentions 'domestic space' and its dysfunctional nature, I should underline what it is about these two domestic spaces that make it dysfunctional. This chapter looks forward to study these domestic spaces with the place and role of the mother as related to other family members. Venturing out from traditional roles of the mother 'Lily' and 'Ma' have altered the very nature 'motherhood'. The mothers have more of their experiences to share than the idea to uphold. Andrea O'Reilly in distinguishing between "motherhood" and "mothering" says:

The term motherhood refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood that is male defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women while the word '*mothering*' refers to women's experiences of mothering that are female defined and potentially empowering to women. While '*motherhood*' as an institution is a male defined site of oppression, women's own experiences of mothering can nonetheless be a source of power (Introduction, 2)⁶

The aforementioned idea brings up feminist undertones in the works. *Room* and *The Blackwater Lightship* may not necessarily imply a breakthrough of female

⁶ Andrea O'Reilly discusses the institutional and experiential aspects of motherhood in *From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich's Of Woman Born*.

characters, specially the mothers in terms of inverting patriarchy. However the flattening of male characters, essentially the father figure alters the eminent presence of the customary patriarchal structures. Gender roles seem to have been reversed and subverted in some sense along with sexuality being problematized in the light of non-normativity. In *The Blackwater Lightship*, the father of Helen and Declan has died and Declan is suffering from AIDS. The three women are constantly seen sorting their problems with one another throughout the story. In *Room*, 'Old Nick' is just one of the other elements that surround Jack and Ma in the narrator's voice. Despite being the root of all evil, *Old Nick* seems to be a deliberately sidelined part of the story. It may be affected by the fact that Jack was too innocent and young to have known or heard about the perpetrator's role in his life. Nonetheless the author's expertise keeps Old Nick at bay. The mothers single-handedly take care of the children in the absence of the father figures. It is the very same absence that goes on to complicate situations for the mother and children.

We see from the very start that Helen had an uncomfortable/ troubled relationship with her mother. There is a sense of solitariness in the character of Helen. It is a detached sense of prying from a third perspective in her involvement with another person (in a conversation, chore etc). Possibly the narrator's voice is so close to Helen's and simultaneously equidistant. Whether it is characteristic of her nature or a repercussion of an occurrence, one can never locate what exactly it is that renders it to Helen as a character. However, the virtual platform can be a subjective amalgamation of incidents, stratum by stratum.

The narrative seems to build up the reader's curiosity to delving into Helen and Lily's relationship. One looks forward to an open confrontation between the two. From her random remarks on her mother such as "I want to kill my mother" (Toibin, 9), the way in which she deals with Manus and Cathal (her children) to distancing herself emotionally from Hugh in moments of introspection, it becomes clear that Helen has a certain zone she zooms in and out of. It is perhaps a subconscious space in her mind that reiterates in her day to day life. It may be possible that her uncomfortable relationship with her mother that built up over the years had an effect on her relationship with her husband and her children. Not to suggest a sense of detachment but rather a sense of retreat in how she zooms out on almost every occasion.

In dealing with the idea of the domestic space, there are three distinct levels of execution. The three generations vis-a-vis Dora's, Lily's and Helen's mark each one's space out where they are the mothers individually and undergo their own experiences as the mothers of their family. Despite their distinct spaces of domestic lives, a common space co-exists in the suffering of Declan and Lily's house in Wexford. It is there that the matrix of relationships heaves to further complexities and also subdues eventually into simpler exchanges and understanding.

The three women never seem to have shared a joint space as a family until tragedy befalls Declan's health. They are more or less sorted and at peace in their individual lives and career. Pioneers of sorts in their own ways of their own generations, we see the three mothers independent and proficiently sufficing for themselves. (Toibin, 44)- Dora Devereux, around 80 years old was good in health for her age. She lived alone, after her husband's death in her former guest house near the cliff in Cush. As Helen goes back in memory to remember her stay at her grandmother's with Declan, we get a vivid account of Dora's much liberal views. She comes across as an updated and opinionated woman for her time and age. Their Saturday nights were spent watching *The Late Late Show* which Dora allowed Helen to watch as long as its content seemed fit. Discussions on politics and women's rights had her bang her fist expressing her agreement with an opinion. Helen, her grandmother and grandfather mostly stayed up until midnight watching debates and controversies of the hierarchy in the church, student leader denouncing Irish bishops or the education system. Contraception and divorce also added to the issues raised in the show (92).

As for Lily, she was the first in the country to use computer skills in her commercial course. She went on to set up her own computers business where she taught basic skills and eventually sold machines to businesses and individuals by the name "Wexford Computers Limited". Helen's first visit to the Wexford Computers building had her taken aback by the fascinating construction and designing. Lily's house was also captivating in the manner that its living room seemed no less than an art gallery to Helen. Lily had done well for herself a successful business woman, independent and motivated, howsoever distant from her children and family. (102) Helen was a school principal. There isn't much said about Helen's workplace except that she manages the schoolwork along the rugged course of time after the news about Declan's condition. In the given context, the corridors and the bench in the school

serve as her melancholic space for introspect while she is at work. Yebra talks about Tobin's representation of family saying:

Tóibín's families being at Civil War with themselves, the balance between saying and forgetting seems necessary. His texts revamp the concepts of memory and identity from being solid and irrefutable, as Revisionism argues, to ambiguous and in crisis. Concepts such as "postmemory", "transference", "narrative fetishism" and "screen memory", and "psychic splitting" make up for the transgenerational working-through of guilt and shame the female protagonists of *The Blackwater Lightship* go through. In my view, these characters incorporate the culture of guilt and shame consubstantial to Irish "cultural memory", which are surreptitiously transmitted across the generations (125)⁷.

Jack's perception of every object and activity in the room is sincere and sensible. It would have been the other way round had he and Ma not lived in confinement or had he the slightest idea of their confinement. In the outside world, he would have so much more at his disposal. However, where he was with what he had was the best that he could possibly imagine. It is as though he shares a mutual understanding and relationship with the objects in the room for instance the insects, the skylight, the bed, the bathtub, the basin, the spoon, the plant and the others. The child brings in much life to the seemingly dull room as if they speak with him in their own silent language. He has his own secrets to keep even with the bare minimum exposure e.g. the spider's web under the table tells of his pain when his mother tries to drive the insects away. He uses terms like "*something that's mine....and not Ma's*" and also admits feeling strange about such a possession/feeling/secret. Jack's sense of connection with the lifeless objects and insects in the room overpower our sense of human relationships. It makes the domestic space dysfunctional from its traditional form. The overall circumstances in which Jack and his Ma live are far from ordinary in every way; so much so that Jack does not have a hint of what the ordinary is. Jack has his mother for both parents, the objects for family and friends, the eleven by eleven foot room for a house, the confined space for the whole world under the sun, the television for

⁷ Jose Maria Yebra, Transgenerational and Intergenerational Family Trauma in Colm Toibin's *The Blackwater Lightship* and "Three Friends".

information and interaction with real people, and 'Dora' from the cartoon on the television for an actual friend. What is common between him and other children of his age is the fact that 'fantasy' encompasses a substantial part in their minds. What is common between *Ma* and other mothers is the fact that parents sometimes lie to their children in order to shield their minds from crude realities of the atrocious world. Tender minds are susceptible to anything that is fed to them. And no parent wants their child to have a scarring emotion to deal with. Donoghue mentions about the instability of parent-child relationship:

When she takes those pills she's recoiling from five years of being his saintly carer; when he throws that vase he's rejecting five years of being her good little son/pal. Personally I find the parent-child relationship inherently unstable, bipolar; a constant push-and-pull to achieve a lively balance. I saw a three-year-old on a street corner last night, on one of those reins to prevent her from running into traffic; she kept running away from her mother and bouncing back, thoroughly enjoying both the sense of rebellion and the sense of safety (Ue, 105)⁸

In an article, *A Little Nearer Redemption: A novel in which innocence and the therapeutic power of talking have not lost their* Rand Richards Cooper says elucidates upon the hovering darkness in the representation of gay lives in Toibin's work. His argument stands out in attaching the grayness to muting of homosexuality. He argues as follows:

Toibin has a stubborn penchant for melodrama. "As she stood there, the sky darkened." "The room was darkened but Helen could make out Declan in the bed." "The colors were darkening now, night was coming down." "A dark shadow seemed to pass in front of the car." "As darkness fell, Helen drove her mother into Wexford." "The dark thoughts about the old house continued to trouble her." "She could not step out from her mother's dark shadow." And on and on. This is an author who elsewhere has lamented literature's habit of presenting gay

⁸ Emma Donoghue talks about the protagonists in her novel in an interview with Tom Ue published in *Journal of Gender Studies*. Vol. 21, No. 1. Routledge. March 2012

life as "darkly sensational," and yet he himself dims the lights at almost every turn.⁹

The quote undoubtedly emanates the ongoing darkness in the text. One can however, take note of the fact that the given shade is not necessarily about the gay life as much as it is about Helen's mind. Even if the aforementioned paleness touched the character of Declan in some way or the other, it simmers in the suffering of Declan; that he was fading away from the light of life and into the demise that AIDS had in store for him. As much as Toibin empathises with homosexuality, Declan may be seen as a metaphor for sacrifice in the text. But that does not undermine the happy lives and strong bond of Paul, Larry and Declan. The very gay friends had replaced family for Declan, for good. There is a sense of celebration and consistency in his relationship with friends as contrary to his own family. It is only the darkness of the tragic premonition in Declan's life. And precisely, the bleakness encompasses the relationship of the family members, more so Helen's inhibitions.

In *Maternal Thinking*¹⁰, Sara Ruddick talks about the experiences and thinking of child rearing over childbearing. Considering that social practices give rise to thought, maternal practices become imperative to preserving, fostering growth and allowing social acceptability of the children. 'Maternal thinking' according to Ruddick is the unified response to the abovementioned demands of a child through reflection, judgement and emotion. She posits a sense of power in the maternal process to redress any devaluation of the same. Maternity is seen as a social practice that reaches out beyond gender dominion and biological affiliations. However, the patriarchal set up deters the development of maternal thinking in mothers with their subjective relation to the practice as powerful or powerless.

Ruddick elucidates upon the skills that she calls the essence of mothering: 'protecting', 'nurturing' and 'training'. The protection requires the mothers to not only protect children from outside danger but also from their own murderousness. She adores the resistance that mothers put up against their own tendency to be violent to their children.

The child's inherent vulnerability is what calls for "mothering". In the process of child rearing, the mother engages in a discipline that develops her intellectual

⁹ Rand Richards Cooper in *A Little Nearer Redemption: A novel in which innocence and the therapeutic power of talking have not lost their power* suggests the darkly sensational representation of gay life in Toibin's work.

¹⁰ Sara Ruddick in *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (1989).

capacities. The judgement making involved in context of setting priorities and making decisions conceives a sense of achievement. Such a conception stands apart from the dominant public conceptions.

In preserving the child's life, the mother has to overcome excessive fear and control. In response to the knowledge of the fragility of life and the desire to preserve, protect and repair, a mother develops the metaphysical approach of "holding" as opposed to acquiring. The aspect of "cheerfulness" is encouraged in maternal thought, which entails a willingness to continue with giving birth and accepting the fact along with embracing life despite its conditions. In the process of fostering growth, the mother who "holds" must simultaneously allow change if need be. Permanence, clarity and certainty must be preceded by innovation, disclosure and responsiveness. The child who is seen as an "open structure," demands an ability to respond to its irregularity, unpredictability and mystery.

The third interest to the mother is to prepare the child to be acceptable in the society. However this interest makes it difficult for her as she herself is powerless and uninvolved in determining the social values of the very same society. Ruddick calls this inauthentic in maternal thought since it involves an assumption of the world for a mother, wherein her own values don't count. She further suggests a transformation of maternal thought through feminist consciousness. Such consciousness can be described as the experience of arriving at truth about oneself and society, viewing the intolerable aspects of social reality in its true form and adapting new ways of living being true to women's past with due obligation to others. The notion of "attentive love" alludes to the constant attention even through the humdrum of daily life along with love for the child in its dual nature of intense attachment and simultaneous detachment that allows the child to grow. It requires a sense of self discipline and effort that is to love a child without using or owning it.

The aforementioned virtues of maternal practice can be shared for the greater good of the world. Then men may expand the horizons of the cause by sharing maternal practices equally and actively so as for such practices to become "parental" rather than maternal. This would inspire the identity of the ones involved as people engaging in child care beyond the power-play of either sex. The concept of the mother and the father would then not stand separate or denote disparity.

Ruddick struggles with the question of whether peaceable women may alter the more disruptive military while procuring some of the power and benefits offered by the military service. She concludes that engaging women in peace movements rather than recruiting them into military would pacify the turbulent tendencies of the world. The sensitive approach of Maternal Thinking offers a positive rendering to save the world at large from destruction. By imbibing the goodness from the maternal experiences and according such peacefulness to men and women alike we may work towards peace.

Drawing on the discussed renderings of Ruddick's "Maternal Thinking", *The Blackwater Lightship* and *Room* reverberate on myriad facets. The discussions may be applied sub-thematically to *The Blackwater Lightship* and rigorously to *Room*. Taking both stories into account the mother-child relationship needs to be viewed distinctly from each other. While one addresses a fully grown woman as the daughter, Helen (who herself is a mother of two at the advent of the novel), the other operates through a five year old child. In the process of 'preserving', 'nurturing' and 'training' the child, the first protagonist does not seem duly attended to. On the face value of her oscillating memories and experiences, it is apparent that she has developed hatred for her mother. Such a development is a result of layering incidents and misunderstandings. Retreating from confrontation and clarity, the mother-child relationship suffers tremendously. Helen seems to hold her mother responsible for her own state of becoming hateful. The narrative does not provide ample incidents of her early childhood except around the time of Mr. Breen's death. The negative impacts the memory and stays intact more than the positive. This is vivid in as far as Helen's memories stretch back. Whether or not she has been catered to, is not for the readers to judge as the ailment seems to be triggered by one outstanding event- the loss of her father. Prior to the event, nothing as such of Helen's and Declan's childhood has been addressed. Therefore the only lens for amplification is the exact incident of Lily's (Helen's mother) bereavement which is absolute failure in Helen's perception. The novel begins with Helen's interaction with her own children- Cathal and Manus. While she deals with her elder son, Cathal like adults, him responding likewise, it fails to work on Manus. Later she goes on to agree with Dora's observation that Cathal resembled Helen's father while Manus resembled Declan (136). The reference instantly conjures coherence in Helen's closeness with her father and Cathal

resembling him. In their nature of composure and mimicking adults, Cathal resembles Helen a lot, too. Not that she is less attached to Manus or Declan, the reference is partially crucial to understanding Helen's relationship with her father. In the episode of her symbolically bidding Mr. Breen adieu, which has been discussed in a latter chapter of this dissertation, her emotional connection with him comes forth invariably. This perhaps is one of the reasons that aggravated her hatred toward Lily. The departure of the parent she may have been closer to, added weight to the loss and her mother's adaptive withdrawal. Also, Helen's deliberate distance from Hugh, mentioned early in the novel (25), seems related to her distancing from Lily. Hugh tries to bridge the distance with his wife, somewhere afraid and insecure that he may delve too much into its whereabouts. Helen had geared up to eradicate any possibility of passing her pain on to her children. Perhaps, she was ending up doing the same in the way she was away from Cathal and Manus while accompanying Declan through his last days. Unintentionally, she may have been inflicting the same on her children that Lily did on her, during her father's treatment. Comparing the two instances on preserving, nurturing and training the children if not physically in this context but emotionally, Helen appears distant from her children. The only relief in the case of Cathal and Manus is the fact that their father (Hugh) accompanied them while their mother was away. From the roots of caretaking as proposed by Ruddick, the two social processes- mothering and peacemaking construct a wider conception from people to communities and nations to the planet. While making peace with her mother unwillingly, Helen may have disrupted the equilibrium with her own children. Similarly Lily has nothing to lose when all is lost on her domestic front. Her husband has passed away, her daughter disconnected with anguish and her son wriggling with a devouring disease. She did not abandon them, only failed to acknowledge their emotional vulnerability. The presence of Larry and Paul in Dora's house is an instigating factor for Lily to realise her loss, the hard way. She had not only been replaced as the caretaker emotionally but also physically as Declan's friends looked after him through his gradual physical impairment. With the acceptance of the harsh truth, she works towards repairing whatever was left of the family. "There is no simple way to unravel the destructiveness we have created, to dismantle its weapons, tease apart the allure of its concepts, and cure ourselves of its fearful romance" (Ruddick, 251). The documentation of mothering activities has not only transcended

beyond the idea of the mother in *The Blackwater Lightship* but offered hope with its sensitivity.

The mothers play the risk of being overburdened with caretaking while depriving themselves of care at the same time prevails in maternal practices. The stance of “Maternal Thinking” that pushes for inclusion in the public sphere encourages women to legitimise their concern for themselves along with that of others. The act of caring must not be confused with sacrificing themselves for others. This stance on similarity values the possibilities for mothers/caretakers to enable their own potentialities to be able to foster others’. To expand oneself and allow the same for others recognizes the idea of interdependence.

Room offers to us a mother of extraordinary capacities for adaptation and passion for her child’s well being. Needless to say, she is devoid of any choice making with resources at her disposal, she makes the best of what she is given. ‘Ma’ not only protects her child throughout from the captor’s contact, from illness and possible effects of inadequacy but keeps track of his nutrition with ‘cereals’, ‘beans’, ‘eggs’ and breastfed milk that suffices for his nutrition in the scantily provided ‘Room’. Jack is homeschooled with mental and physical exercises and is routine in all kinds of hygiene that makes him as smart as, or possibly smarter than most children of his age. In how he understands sarcasm in conversations after the escape and his responsiveness on his first interaction with anyone other than his mother, he is a child who knows his poems, pop music, books and stories, cartoon characters and more. He has been closely preserved, nurtured and trained in the proximity of his mother. While fulfilling all such responsibilities and taking care of Jack’s vulnerable understanding of the world, ‘Ma’ seems to be perpetually struggling with her tooth ache, her injured wrist and her mental dilemma. In planning the ‘great escape’ she takes a risk with their lives although that is the last resort as she judges the patterns in Old Nick’s receding providence. Her identity crisis roots for her previous self when she and Jack escape from ‘Room’. The duo has a hard time adjusting to the realities and prying eyes of the ‘outside world’. The essence of caretaking that ‘Ma’ is always seen to uphold is intrinsically imbibed in the nature of Jack. It is evidently apparent in their episode after the escape, how Jack becomes sensitive and adaptive not only to the change in his surrounding but also to his mother’s crisis. He appears observant and

provident to his mother's needs in her dealings and interactions with other people. It would not be wrong to say that his simplistic attitude and adorably meaningful gestures and words keep his mother going and recovering from the adversities of depression and identity crisis.

The altering and reciprocating identities of maternal nature in the *The Blackwater Lightship* and *Room* respectively resonate with Ruddick's work. The idea is not to label them under a feminist cognizance but to offer a perspective in how mothering can be viewed in untraditional ways. Maternal thinking for this reason evolves with the nature of its context. It emerges from its distortion, subversion and inscription in fixed private spheres to more outgoing and redemptive scenarios.

Chapter- 2

Dealing with Trauma in a Dysfunctional Space

I There was a time when you were not a slave, remember that. You walked alone, full of laughter, you bathed bare-bellied. You say you have lost all recollection of it, remember . . . You say there are no words to describe this time, you say it does not exist. But remember. Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent. –Monique Wittig, Les Guérillères.

The dysfunctional in the domestic space of *Room* and *The Blackwater Lightship* has been brought out in the previous chapter. This chapter elucidates upon the same, however with a psychoanalytic comprehension. The protagonists reach out for homeliness beyond the traditional parameters of the family. We have already discussed what the dysfunctional aspects are. We shall henceforth elaborate what about them or how they have impacted the psyche and proceedings in the lives and relationships of the individuals.

An integral point of argument in the two very different plots is, ‘Conflict’. The conflict in question goes beyond the evident conflict between individuals. Not to undermine the conflict between the self and the alter ego, the constant friction between the past and the present seems to underpin the storylines. The cause of the apparent Conflict is ‘trauma’. The experience of trauma is often traced back to its source as a ‘tragic event’ or ‘tragedy’ which is usually the point of disjunction in the psyche of the victim/suffering. A perpetrator or a definite cause of such an incident is the ultimate reason behind the conflict in the current state to be studied.

The discrepancies of relationships ranging from ‘within the self’, ‘between/amongst the inmates’ to the ‘private and public’ seem to be encompassed by a larger fundamental predicament. This precisely is the conflict between the past and the present. The endeavours of finding solace only end up like crashing waves on the shores of Wexford in *The Blackwater Lightship* and detested visits of the captor in *Room*. Every effort at making peace appears to be shaking hands with a clenched fist. Tracing the causes of any such situation would take us back to where it all began. It is a plausible method in the given context so as for us to get to the roots of the discrepancy. In the process of doing so, a major tragic event becomes evident in both texts. The narratives begin in the midst of a regular current of domestic life and space.

However, they take us back and forth through flashing back into memories and consciousness only to unfurl the deep seated 'trauma' in the heart of the plots. The juncture of the trauma is precisely the point of bifurcation between the past and the present. This juncture broadly divides the realm of the bygone and that of the existing. The constantly colliding past and the present features as an integral theme in sustaining the plot.

The father figure in each case is instrumental in the setting up of trauma in the life of their families. The authors employ the father of the children to inflict a major shift in the psyche of the female counterpart, the mother of the children. This in turn, affects the lives of the children along with the relationship they share with their mothers. The domestic space becomes the arena of thus affected psyche, persona, lifestyle and the nitty gritty of life. And as we read the text, the dysfunction comes forth and recedes. The dysfunction can be seen as a result of the traumatic imprints on the family. The adaptations post trauma in the lives of the affected, specially the mother, helps her deal with and simultaneously escape reality. The mother in each case is seen dedicating herself to an alternate course of action from the regular. The efforts go into channelizing their energy and time into something that can distract them (in a positive way) and offer productivity. For instance, Ma dedicates herself to bringing up Jack in the best possible way she can. And Lily goes on to invest and become a pioneer in the computer business. The both manage to do pretty well in the seemingly invested areas. It is clearly a coping method that started off after the tragic events in their lives. However, in both cases they end up falling out on a constant balance. There is a thing or two that goes inadequately attended with respect to the children. This lack of meticulous heed not only affects the young minds in inevitable ways, but also carries the seeds of upcoming complexities. This does not by any means imply a judgement on their parenting or dearth of the ideally upheld pinnacle of perfection in a mother. The observation is to pick up traces in the given circumstance that may have aggravated the effects of the tragedy.

The character of the father in each case appears to trigger the dilemma and then fade into obscurity. More often than not, the authors seem to deliberately sideline the father figures from centrality. Even though, they may have been the cause of the trauma, we as readers only see them as intermittent reference in the core of the circumstance and the plot. The central character is the child with his/her immediate bond with the mother.

Trauma may be defined as an original inner catastrophe or an experience of excess which overwhelms the subject symbolically or physically without being accessible to him/her. This “radical and shocking interruption of the universe, but not its total destruction¹¹” implies that the pain is vigorously relocated into the subconscious of the subject. In Geoffrey Hartman’s words, “The knowledge of trauma... is composed of two contradictory elements. One is the traumatic event, registered rather than experienced. It seems to have bypassed perception and consciousness, and falls directly into the psyche. The other is a kind of memory of the event, in the form of a perpetual troping of it by the bypassed or severely split (dissociated) psyche (537).¹²”

The trauma needs to be dealt with, on two levels, the individual trauma and the collective trauma. For the both to be understood we should first outline the specific tragic event that eventually built up the traumatic experience on different levels.

The abduction of Ma at the age of nineteen is the point of tragedy in her life. She spends seven years in captivity of the character called Old Nick (by Jack). Jack is the result of Ma’s rape by Old Nick. The child oblivious to any such idea or knowledge lives blissfully with Ma. The individual trauma that Ma has adapted to, over the years with the help of Jack, becomes evident at this point of introduction to the readers. An apparent effect of the trauma on Ma in the narrative is the bouts of depression she occasionally enters.

Jack’s trauma begins with his realisation of an actual world outside Room. It would be more apt to say, with the negation of almost every fact that he has ever known. It sure does not instantly disturb him as a fatal blow. He is intrigued by the new found truth like any inquisitive five year old. He wants to know more and tries tallying every piece of additional information that Ma has to offer, with his previous knowledge of things. Even with the execution of Ma’s plan of escape, we see Jack as a courageous child. It is only after the successful venture and final rescuing that the effects of the incident seem to take a toll on him. What he was told in theory by Ma about the world outside practically becomes a regular part of his schedule. From minuscule encounters to random acquaintances, does he actually begin to learn how

¹¹ A. Goldberg elucidates upon ‘trauma’ in “Trauma, Narrative, and Two Forms of Death”, *Literature and Medicine*, Spring 2006, (p. 137).

¹² Geoffrey H. Hartman talks about the knowledge of trauma and its effects on the psyche. “On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies”, *New Literary History* 1995 (p. 537).

everything is different from when he and Ma were the only existing beings in their only safe abode, Room.

Things begin to change for Jack and Ma after their escape. The second half of the narrative finds them both yearning, sometimes, for the modesty of their previous world. The collective trauma is that of Ma and Jack's together. The entire process of planning out, escaping from the room and finally being 'in the outside' takes a toll on the mother and the child. They become free, but feel strange about this freedom. Simultaneously, they feel lost in the world that is bigger than their 'Room'. This freedom is all that Ma ever dreamed of, during her captivity and it was worth the risks taken. But this world outside is not just new for Jack as a five year old, but equally new for Ma as a mother now. Technically, it may seem easier for Ma to adjust than for Jack. However, she is just as much a novice as Jack is, in the outside world. As a mother, she is treading the old paths for the first time. She is now no more an individual but the guardian of her child. And the circumstance of this guardianship is not an ordinary one or in other words is one of a kind.

Their connection undergoes a fundamental transformation in that it can universally be compared to any parent-child relationship. It is not severed by any means, only detached from the prior premise of confinement. In that, it can totally relate to the initial experiences of a parent and child where the child is let out from the overly protected realm of parent's gaze and care. For instance, a child's first day at school/day-care in a way, hesitantly breaking free from the primordial bond that they have with the parent. The change is difficult on both, on Jack for obvious reasons and no less on Ma. We see glaring role reversals when she tries to kill herself and the child tries to save her not only physically, but brings her back emotionally. Anne Goarzin elucidates theoretically upon Trauma in "Articulating Trauma" stating:

One might claim, as often do the perpetrators of abuse or of terror, that forgetting has also a central role in social memory – or that remembering the forgotten may have a role to play in the elaboration of a common history that attempts to do justice not only, in the case of Ireland for example, to a dreamed collective nation-building but also to the place of the individual in that process.... collective trauma has been passed on through the generations, taking the shape of what Schwab calls, quoting Freud, "*Schilcksalneurose*, that is a 'fate neurosis' [...] hidden

and intangible, relegated to secrecy and silence⁴⁴” which consists in living under a bad spell or curse that often preceded one’s life. The effects of trans-generational memory or the lack of it, and the transmission of body memories through somatic manifestations are but variations on this “curse”. It is also quite palatable in the physical and psychological traumatic aftermath.¹³

Biologically, Old Nick is Jack’s father. Other than that, he is technically a kidnapper and rapist. He holds Ma hostage in his backyard shed, improvised and modified into a prison like shelter that houses Ma and Jack. Jack of course has no knowledge of his relationship with Old Nick. He only sees him as a man who brings them, goods and playthings occasionally, and someone Ma is not particularly fond of.

Old Nick does not evoke any emotion of sentimentality as a father figure and rightly so, for he is an outright criminal that readers only develop disgust and vengeance for. However bearing in mind the facts of kinship, how much ever absurd it may sound to call him a father, he is inevitably Jack’s father by blood. The father is the very cause of trauma and suffering for his kin. Not that he ever cared or could be cared for, his place remains as the perpetrator of devastation and despair in two lives. What follows his sinful crime is the crux of the story. The narrative is a five year old child’s innocent view and understanding of his being. Therefore, Old Nick does not have a place in the narrative apart from intermittent mentions of menial concern. As a technique on the part of Donoghue, it can be read as a deliberate sidelining of the perpetrator. The father is only one of the other components that appear in *Room*, of scarce value in the child’s narration except that he brings supplies. The non living objects in the room have more importance and connection with Jack than Old Nick. This character is evidently kept away from the centrality of structure and narration of the story. He does not matter anywhere in the endearing bond between Jack and Ma. The only time he gains importance in the plot is when he carries Jack out from *Room* under the impression that the child is dead, to bury him. The character gains strength in the act only as it makes the readers’ heart race toward the climax of whether or not Jack can make it out of his clutches.

¹³ Anne Goarzin in “Trauma, Memory and Ireland” elucidates upon the psychological effects of trauma.

Lily's sense of shame on coming back home, after the death of her husband is an evident implication toward her psychological suffering. Lily and Helen have a rare sentimental moment on the beach while the rest (Declan, Larry, Paul) have left. While Lily begins the conversation about Declan's frailty, Helen takes up inquisitively about her father's condition right before he died. Lily's narration of the days she spent with her husband for his treatment in Dublin, evokes pity and sympathy for her character. The time of which Lily narrates to Helen is something the two seem to be bonding over, for the first time. They never had the chance to discuss this before. "We planned everything in detail, and I learnt a lot about him even though I'd been married to him for years. We had our own little world there (Toibin, 241)." She talks about their time in the hospital and how she was not prepared to lose him. She goes on to mention the awkward difficulty she had in talking about the kind of shame at the funeral of her husband. The fact that she would be alone trying to put back the scattered pieces of her life together, alone in looking after Helen and Declan, she knew that nothing would be the same as before. The narrative does not lay much emphasis on this part with the backdrop of Lily's mental condition of the time and its weight on her. Lily admits to her deep sense of loss and embarrassment at not being able to cope with it. It is overtaken by Helen's confession from the time of childhood that she blamed her mother for taking her father away. However, it should be duly noted that the tragic event of Mr. Breen's death had deeply affected Lily who was hoping for him to get better during his last days. It comes up as a traumatic event in her life in the way that she resorts to withdrawal and does so unconsciously. It is most definitely an adaptive method in the given situation whose repercussions she does not realise may go on to affect her children detrimentally, especially Helen.

In the context of the aforementioned conversation, Helen has a sudden realisation which she tells her mother. In her subconscious mind, she had always believed that Lily took Mr. Breen away. Just as the mind of a child associates a fantasy in his/her mind with a situation, it helps them make sense of the inexplicable or incomprehensible state of affairs. It correlates with the concept of 'Family Romances' by Sigmund Freud.¹⁴ His idea of the psychology of neuroses talks about the freeing of an individual. A child develops a criticism of sorts, of his own parent(s) as a part of growing up. In a phase/moment of unreciprocated love, the young mind

¹⁴ Family Romances: Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume IX (1906-1908). See p.235-242.

finds a vent in the idea that is consciously recollected from early childhood. Helen, at the age of eleven deals with her father's death in a similar way. She not only holds her mother responsible for taking him away but builds upon a fiction in her mind that Lily has possibly locked or sent him away from the children. Daydreams, fulfilment of wishes and correction of actual life are features of the fiction/fantasy that is generated in the mind of a child as a process of growing up. The sequence of events from watching her parents go away for her father's treatment and not hearing from them for months together, staying at the grandparents' place with a confused sense of abandonment from their parents, having to take up the lead as the elder sibling to Declan, looking after him in a way and deprived of a whiff of their regular homeliness and humdrum of daily life, the visual backdrop and sound of the Wexford house and the lighthouse beaming across at night, put together a dark atmosphere for a child's imagination. In the process, Helen is informed about the demise of her father on an odd day. Lily comes back and the funeral takes place. It is undoubtedly a strange transition for a child in the situation to deal with. It makes for a rather nerve racking mental state.

The collective distress for both characters- Helen and Lily is caused by the death of their dear one (Mr. Breen). However their suffering is not mutual or interactive. Each withdraws into separate zones of an individual nature. Instead of strengthening each other they phase into their recluse selves as part of adaptation. The narrative from the start portrays Helen as the central victim of such disorientation. However, a deeper delving into the contextual reading should draw light to the mental state of her mother at the crucial time. Most definitely, she seems to fall out on extending respite to Helen whose mind was comparatively more vulnerable at the time. It can be seen as a loophole in the dutiful nurturing of a child. Nonetheless, one cannot disregard the fact that Lily was perhaps fighting her own insecurities and anguish. Deterring from an outburst or virtual breakdown may have been her way of helping her children deal with the loss. Unfortunately, it does not turn out pragmatic for Helen and she detests the way her mother behaved so calm and sorted about the entire situation. It added yet another level of complexity in the already confusing course of events. Their relationship keeps building on this disturbance and gets worse with time. They stop connecting with each other over the years and feel wronged by the other, more so in Helen's case as she grows up.

The untimely demise of Mr. Breen is the cause of trauma in the lives of Helen and Lily. Toibin perhaps employs the father figure as a tool to trigger discomfort that develops into an inflexible tiff between the daughter and the mother. Not that the tragedy directly distanced the two, but became pivotal in loosening the bond as both catered a little less to each others' need for solace. The protagonist's despair is beautifully sketched through her consistent flashbacks however the mother's is a first person account of memories in chunk. The existing state of relationships is propelled by the departing father. And like the previously mentioned status of father figure in *Room*, the narrative abstains from allowing him the centre stage. His position is eventually taken over by his son, Declan whose upcoming demise is the reason behind the family's reconciliation from distortion.

In the essay, "The Meaning of the Phallus," Lacan discusses desires and their relation to the splitting of selves, or what we can call trauma. Desire, according to him is intrinsically connected with 'Drive', a force that can only end in death. Lacan also says that desire "is neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the difference resulting from the subtraction of the first from the second, the very phenomenon of their splitting (1153).¹⁵"

The aforementioned discussion assorts details of traumatic concern in the texts *Room* and *The Blackwater Lightship*. It ushers into an analogy of the two works under the banner of conflicting past and present. The trauma and its repercussions do not merely imply a dysfunction in the psyche of the characters but also outline the process of disorientation in the visible matrix of relationships.

"The mirror stage . . . manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of fantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality . . . to the assumption of the armor of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development ("Mirror" 1126)."

In *Room*, Ma seems to have dedicated herself to protecting her child. Jack is not only her son but also an avenue of escape in the confinement. The schism in her identity

¹⁵ Jacques Lacan's "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud." *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, 3rd ed. Ed. David Richter. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007. 1129-48. Print.

comes forth specially after their escape on a television interview that she agrees to give.

“Yeah, but for me, see, Jack was everything. I was alive again, I mattered. So after that I was polite [to my captor].’ ‘Polite? Oh, you mean with—’ ‘It was all about keeping Jack safe.’ ‘Was it agonizingly hard to be, as you put it, polite?’ Ma shakes her head. ‘I did it on autopilot, you know, Stepford Wife (Room, 291).”

With the onset of maternal life, Ma perhaps harbours a newly formed part of herself with regards to her child. The ‘mother’ in her, never holds her back from nurturing Jack as a chain that was unwillingly attached to her identity now. After their escape, Ma has a hard time dealing with the duality of her being. It seems to strike her more bluntly now that she is back in touch with the world where her previous self dwelled. This is precisely where the schism of past and present in her identity stares her in the eye. The loss of her prior self comes in conflict with her recent and current experiences of mothering. She explains to Jack- “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” (Room, 277). While on her way for the interview, she insists, “Get off me. I’m late already.’ Her hands are pressing my shoulders but I hold on even more. ‘You’re not a baby. I said get off— (287).”

Jack’s head hits the table and become instantaneous of putting Ma in the dilemma of reconciling with herself or with her being a mother. Lacan’s theories about mothers and infants are relevant here as Ma struggles to restore autonomy. Ma’s troubles with gaining autonomy from her child relate to Lacan’s theories about mothers and infants. The confined life of Jack and Ma together has nourished their relationship in ways that may not have been otherwise. His proposition of the Mirror Stage is generally in the context of mother- infant relationship. In his essay *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience*, Lacan’s depiction of a mother with the infant in front of a mirror appropriates the given state of Ma and Jack. The infant leans towards the mirror as he recognizes himself in the reflection. As the infant recognizes himself in the mirror, the mother exclaims in appreciation, “there’s my good boy!” This exclamation henceforth sets a benchmark for the infant to become that reflection in the mirror that the mother praises. The child develops a sense of desire, aspiring and looking up to his mother’s love. Lacan goes on to complicate this desire by depicting another figure in the

background, possibly of a father. The child sees that this third figure distracts the mother's gaze that was until now focussed on his reflection. The situation stimulates a kind of retort in the infant that forms the base what is called the "Oedipal Complex". Lacan proposes that all relationships stem from desire. The depiction of the infant in pursuit of his mother's attention and affection translates into a lover seeking another lover's attention (Lacan, Mirror).¹⁶

This state becomes difficult for Ma to handle when they are out in the world. Jack still clings to the singular identity of himself and Ma, in proximity. He struggles with any kind of disassociation from his mother when he puts "Ma and me" as one unit. The process of rediscovery for Ma involves minuscule details like checking her e-mails, reading a book, listening to iPod and visits from her family members. Jack has a hard time dealing with the new situation just like an infant gets uncomfortable with the reflection of the third figure in the mirror, as per Lacan's theory. "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". He is baffled at Ma's willingness to engage in things that don't involve him. He is accustomed to a different pattern of schedule and lifestyle up until now that has built his idea of normal and regular. The sudden shift is a challenge for him to catch up with. Despite the hurdled way down to 'normalcy', Jack works quite well through the acclimatisation and separation of mother and infant. Every child goes through it and so does he eventually.

The psychoanalytic perspective of Julia Kristeva that one must abject the maternal- that which has created the subject to construct an identity. The mother being abjected in the give process comprises the parts of the self that may threaten one's individual identity. According to the theory, abjection is the development of a sense of otherness attached to the exclusion of one's own components of identity. It defines and simultaneously excludes respective parts of the self.

Don't move don't move don't move JackerJack stay stiff stiffstiff. I'm squished in Rug, I can't breathe right, but dead don't breathe anyway... The beep beep again, then the click that means Door is open. The ogre's got me, fee fie foe fum. Hot on my legs, oh no, Penis let some pee out. And also a bit of poo squirted out my bum, Ma never said this

¹⁶ "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience." Richter, 1123-28.

would happen. Stinky. Sorry, Rug. A grunt near my ear, Old Nick's got me tight... I count my teeth but I keep losing count 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. I can't feel my arms. The air's different. Still the dustiness of Rug but when I lift my nose a tiny bit I get this air that's ... Outside (Donoghue, 171).

The discontinuity from the physical proximity of mother separates Jack, an instance of perhaps the first level of abjection. He physically becomes aware of the Outside for the first time by coming in contact with its material presence. The smell of the air and the darkness of the sky introduce him through his sensory acknowledgement. Although he looks out for Ma's tooth in the middle of the rush and constantly thinks about his mother in his endeavours of getting away from Old Nick.

However, it appears to be a rougher transition for Ma. She gets offended and agitated at any implication that Jack may be struggling with daily tasks or undergoing trauma. At this point we can sense insecurity in Ma regarding her mothering. She feels judged by the prying eyes of the society. She describes the techniques she followed in keeping Jack healthy and physically fit, as she gives her interview for the television. Also while being asked questions by Dr. Clay in the clinic, she emphasises no need for Jack's check up. She is perhaps recalling every detail she paid heed to, as a mother while in the room. She becomes apprehensive about the DNA test until she is reassured of its formal necessity to be presented in the court about their case. Jack despite being a child, is observant of and sensitive to Ma's bouts of frustrations.

Ma's sounding mad. "You think I wouldn't have given Jack a different color of Play-Doh every day if I could have?"

Dr. Clay says Ma's other name. "Nobody's expressing any judgment about your choices and strategies. (243)

In Hartman's words, Ma is encountering "mostly a repetitious nightmare purging itself of internalized or institutionalized superstitions". She constantly convinces herself of her own credibility has a mother even though as Dr. Clay points out that nobody was judging her choices and strategies. "Ma shows Dr. Clay her homework, they talk more about not very interesting stuff like 'depersonalisation' and 'jamais vu'

(241).” “She keeps telling Dr. Clay she’s fine but she doesn’t sound fine. She and him talk about ‘cognitive distortions’, they do a breathing exercise, I play with the puppets (243).”

Ma clearly seems to be undergoing psychiatric assistance in the clinic. Even Jack realises how she asserts she is ‘doing fine but that is not actually the case. Ma, in dealing with the compounded trauma of returning to the world following her captivity and recognizing herself as a mother as well as self, also confronts a tendency to give up. It is not merely the experience of mothering but also the journey of rediscovering her individual identity that has split her stability.

The trauma of her kidnap clashing with the trauma of the conspicuous split in the self leads her where all drives according to Lacan finish: death. Over the time, Ma seems to have made peace with the split identity of hers, as a mother in captivity. She was happy with Jack. After the escape, when everything is back to ‘normal’, she has to reconcile with her lost self. But her current status as Jack’s mother makes it difficult for her to balance the two. The strife of reconciliation renders her emotionally weak and mentally disturbed. Her attempt at suicide is her way of escaping the trauma and simultaneously returning to her lost self. Ma admits being tired of making peace with her conflicting self as follows-

“Were you tired of playing?”

I don’t hear anything, I think she’s gone. “Ma?”

“I was tired,” she says. “I made a mistake.”

“You’re not tired anymore?” She doesn’t say anything. Then she says,

“I am. But it’s OK” (337).

Ma tries to be more stable as can be seen in the conversation. She eventually organizes her plans of carrying on with life as the mother of her child besides returning to college and blending with the society. In the new apartment for Jack and herself, she decides to keep separate rooms for the both, allowing each other space and autonomy towards self development. “On the back of the door was her mother’s dressing-gown and behind it hung two ironed white shirts. She took one of them down and held it up against her and looked in the mirror. She put her feet into his shoes, which were much too big for her (Toibin, 80).”

After being dropped off by Father Griffin to her house, Helen makes her way in without the keys, through the kitchen. All the while when she and Declan were in Cush at her grandmother’s house, she desperately longed to be back here. And now

that she is back, she notices a strange silence unlike ever before. She goes through the tiles, fireplace, the door, the kitchen, the cutlery and thinks about everything in the house that their father must have laid his hands on, last. Going with the rhythm of her flashback, it becomes clear that this scene enunciates the sinking in, of her father's death. She is perhaps bidding her father farewell. In the process of accepting the bitter truth, she wishes for her father's presence as she goes through his clothes in the wardrobe. And as she holds his clothes against herself, with his shoes on her feet, she looks into the mirror. As she does so, her reflection perhaps takes her closer to the virtual presence of her father hence she reaches out for more things to complete the look of her father's attire. In laying his clothes and hat and shoes, we see her direly craving for his presence. Her reflection with the father's clothes in the mirror perhaps goes on to instigate hostility for her mother. Subconsciously, she always holds her mother responsible for taking her father away and abandoning her and Declan in a state of confusion. She believes in some way or the other Lily is the reason their father is no more with them. And the way Lily withdraws after his passing away is a little too complicating for an eleven year old child's mind. The hostility expounds with time and Lily's apparent indifference. This may have led to what we understand from the theory of 'Electra Complex' by Carl Gustav Jung. "Declan said it was proof if they wanted proof, that boys wanted to sleep with their mother and kill their father.

'They just wanted to stay up late,' Hugh said. 'It just happened that I was in charge.'

'Did you want to sleep with your mother and kill your father?' Helen asked Declan.

'No, no,' he laughed, 'gay boys want the opposite, or at least eventually they do.'

'Sleep with your father?' Hugh asked. His tone was earnest, dead serious.

'Yeah, and have a baby, Hugh,' Declan said drily.

'I still want to kill my mother,' Helen said. 'Not every day, but most days. I cannot imagine anyone wanting to sleep with her.' (Toibin, 9).

Although this conversation is a light hearted one. It intimates the reader with the extent of hate Helen has for her mother. She cannot relate affection with Lily anymore. The initial strain and the eventual recuperation between Helen and Lily are caused by events surrounding the men in the family. Declan becomes the only hope of

reconnection between them. The feeling of alienation from the time of their stay at their grandparents' place to the never ending quietness of Lily as she picked Helen up from school, ushers Helen into puberty faster. In a crucial phase of life as an adolescent, Helen matures away from tenderness. We see her taking over as the guardian of Declan during their stay in Cush and after coming home. When her mother should have taken them in her arms and been expressive about her turbulent heart, Helen watched her distancing day by day. Lily needed to keep her children close so they could gain strength from one another, but she instead resorted to pushing them away for their own good. Little did she know how far she pushed them away, especially Helen. We see it in her conversation with Paul as she says:

“My mother taught me never to trust anyone's love because she was always on the verge of withdrawing her own. I associated love with loss, that's what I did. And the only way that I could live with Hugh and bring up my children was to keep my mother and my grandmother away from me (188).”

Lily had not shown up at a family gathering where she was supposed to meet Hugh (Helen's husband) and their children for the first time. Lily takes upon herself the blame of separation. She may have instigated the tiff but her treatment of Helen had taken her further away. Helen was expected to stay closer to Lily and Dora, take the job they had found for her whereas Declan's treatment as a child appears different. More often than not, such instances strangle the free willed youth. Helen felt her freedom was being curbed and it suffocated her in an already disturbed domestic space. “You should have heard them both, and all they wanted, of course, was to be driven here and driven there, and have messages collected and dinners cooked. And where was Declan during all of this? He was on his first summer holidays after his first year doing Pharmacy in college and what was he doing? Was he washing out the floor of his grandmother's so-called guest-house? No, he was working as a ticket seller in a cinema in Leicester Square in London, and he was, as he will tell you himself, having the time of his life (182).”

After losing the father in the family, the fissures in relationships of the inmates began expanding with every passing day; sometimes due to the generation gap and sometimes due to selective expectations from one another that the other failed to fulfil. In the aforementioned passage, it is seen how Declan being the younger of the two was more pampered as a child and even as they grew up. In ways he is sanctioned

liberty to choose what he wants to eat, to work where he wants and gets around to addressing his sexual orientation by the end. This does not imply that things were easier for him as compared to Helen. Both children were raised in a more liberal atmosphere for their time and grew up to be independent. What makes the difference between their treatments is a level of expectation that bothers Helen. Even though Declan gets around with his ways, he ends up paying immensely for it. He becomes a sacrificial character to mend the cracks in the family. Declan's lurking death could or even did come up as the second round of tragedy for the family. The difference this time was, all of them were together preparing towards the foreseen. The distance caused by the previous death in the family was now healing as they stick together despite personal discomfort. The text ends on the note that Helen and Lily bond after Declan's death.

Chapter- 3

Limitations and Transgressions through Liminal Space

Liminality is said to be the state of a blurry boundary zone between a previous way of structuring one's identity and a fully transformed state.¹⁷ It is a stage of ambiguity that occurs in the middle stage of rituals to mark the threshold of identity, time or community. *The Contemporary Irish Novel, Critical Readings* by Linden Peach asserts the renderings of renowned theorists such as Homi Bhabha which is inferred in "Representations of National Identity in Two Contemporary Irish Novels" by Tünde Gál, stating:

The Contemporary Irish novel has a strong sense of both continuity and disruption. Interrupting the continuum of the past and the present involves reclaiming rather than rejecting tradition. In contemporary novels, identity for the central protagonist is a matter of fantasy arising from their sense of dispossession. (Peach 11) Homi Bhabha, a postcolonial critic uses the phrase "in-between" space or "time lag" which means that those who have been previously marginalized or silenced enter before they find their new identities, which is marked by uncertainty. It is an "interrogative space, allowing for a process of exploration, experiment and re-vision". (Peach 20) It is an aspect of the novel in which writers explore the nature of nationhood and national identity. Nationalism, initially finding expression in covert communities, organizations and activities, became a homogenizing discourse to which other subject identities based on class, gender, sexuality or race were subordinated. Identity is a construct, on the one hand based on differences and on the other it is a narrative. It represents memories, how does a community represent itself; how do they tell their own story. A nation is a product of a historical narrative which reflects the voice of the dominant group. Nationalism can be seen as an idealized view of the past, stemming from the legacy of the Easter Rising in 1916 and the war of Independence (1919-1921).

¹⁷ "liminal", *Oxford English Dictionary*. Ed. J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989. OED Online Oxford 23, 2007

In both the texts, we see the journey of the protagonists, mothers and main/central characters from the current given point (where the texts have begun) to the point where it all disruption began. In *Room*, Ma and Jack's journey takes them from Room to the outside world where the disruption from regular began for Ma. Her life changed ever since. In *The Blackwater Lightship*, their journey is back to grandma's house in Cush where the disruption began. It was there that Helen grew up faster than she would and it is the space with matrices of memories, sound, smell, chores and minute details that changed everything about Helen's life and her relationship with Lily.

The premise of the final destination in both cases seems to have been articulated by their respective authors for a reason and more so the liminal spaces of transition in each case. Perhaps the liminal space between Room and the outside is the rehabilitation clinic and the 44straci space in BWL is the coast of the Blackwater where all important, heart to heart conversations take place along with the scenic metaphors at constant play.

"When I was young, lying in bed in your granny's house,' her mother said, 'I used to believe that Tuskar was a man and the Blackwater Lightship was a woman and they were both sending signals to each other and to other lighthouses, like mating calls. He was forceful and strong and she was weaker but more constant, and sometimes she began to shine her light before darkness had really fallen. And I thought they were calling to each other; it was very satisfying, him being strong and her being faithful ... And all that turned out not be true. You know, I thought your father would live forever. So I learned things very bitterly (192)."

On their way to Ballyvaloo, strolling by the beach, Lily seems nostalgic. She shares with her daughter, memories from childhood and their symbolic reference in her actual life. This creates a conspicuous state of closeness between the two. The fact that her mother is sharing things from the past that she never did before, what she (Lily) saw and felt in her younger days and opening up about her husband, Helen seems strangely drawn to her mother. She 44straciz the shift her mother's presence is evoking in her. This is what she had craved for, all that time after her father's death from her mother- a need to open up. This 44stracizing makes Helen feel uncomfortable and she tries to back off from this closeness. The hostility is so strong that she cannot let it slide under this whiff of instant transformation.

Declan and Helen's idea of home is important in the given context. The both had a sense of discomfort with Lily's new house but for obvious reasons. This was not the house where they spent their childhood. It did not exude any warmth or memory. It was not their home. Instead, Dora's house in Wexford has more to offer to the children even now as they have grown up. The precarious house on a crumbling cliff in Wexford, is never a singular unit in the text. For what it means and the role it plays, it is accompanied by persistent resonances from the sea and the wind. The spectacle of sloping roads, the Tuskar and the Blackwater lightship beaming their light, the eroding rocks and cliffs are in constant play too. Whether the erosion 45stracizin the wearing away of the family or that of excruciating differences, it metaphorically represents the turmoil of the human psyche. The onset of the devoured state of relationships began with the father's cancer and has brought them to the son's AIDS. It seems to have completed a full cycle by the end of the novel. The acceptance of Declan's death amidst the tiff reinforces the might of nature over menial inconsistencies of human lives. Watching the "resolute hardness" of the sea (260), Helen 45straciz that nature doesn't need spectators for its validation. However sullen, it remains beautiful unlike human 45straciz. At this juncture, Helen seems struck by a sense of existential introspection. Every situation deemed critical and every change irrevocable, stood pea-sized before the sublime nature. Declan's deteriorating condition was part and parcel of the inevitable. "She stood at the edge of the cliff until the sun came out from behind the black rainclouds (260)."

The coast connecting the land and the sea provides for the 45straci space in the lives of the family members. Dora's house and the backdrop of the sea become integral to the process of redemption in the text. This 45straci space not only redeems the dysfunctional domestic space but enlarges its domain of understanding, acceptance, forgiveness and sustenance.

The transgression is not merely in terms of an alternate gay family that Declan has found. The transgression is more of an expansion/extension of his own biological family that has emotionally disintegrated and scattered over time which in the last days of Declan not only comes close but also extends its own boundaries to incorporate/encompass the alternate gay family. It not only repairs its past shackles but welcomes intentionally/unintentionally Paul and Larry into their own. We get to see happy, carefree moments amongst all of them during their stay in Wexford at Dora's house. Initially they are not welcomed open heartedly, however eventually

they get along and share stories from the past, cater to Declan together etc. So, in a way it is not only Declan's character and the imminent crisis of his pending demise that heals the strain of the past but also the presence of Paul and Larry and brings more cohesion in the fissures.

The given state of Declan's health is deplorable. It not only restricts him physically but is daily devouring him mentally and emotionally. It is as good as losing control of one's body. However the very cause of his condition, AIDS is simultaneously the reason, his family is back together. Looking past personal grudges and long held inhibitions, the inmates get together to accompany him in his last days. The awkward moments of silence in Dora's kitchen are eventually overtaken by impulsive arguments. (187). The emotional and physical standstill leads to long walks by the shore of the Blackwater. The quiet gazes at the crashing waves become sincerely intimate conversations about memories. The tuskar and Blackwater's beams across the house at night turn into mornings with dear ones. Everything grey and dull is filled with light, if not colours. The pain, loss of eyesight, convulsive vomit and 46straciz are distinctly weakening Declan day by day but in the process, also healing deep seated wounds.

The limitations of the strenuous relationship between Helen and Lily expanded the boundaries of the family in ways that Paul and Larry had become as much part of the family as anyone else. Among Paul, Larry and Declan none were romantically involved with one another. What is striking, is the love, comfort and closeness that the three share. It is not only in ways representative of friendship taking over familial bonds but of the strength of the gay community to stand by one another through thick and thin.

Through the instances of excerpts mentioned below, it becomes clear that it is not only Helen who has distanced from her mother emotionally but also Declan, who seems to have traversed away from the mother. Of course the siblings' journeys to the current point in the text have been different from each other's. But there are points when the two have a mutual understanding and agreement on their mother's intermittently apparent absurdity causing discomfort. For instance there is a time when Declan says that their mother is becoming "needy".

'She's finding it all very tough. She's jealous that I didn't want to come to her house. She brought me there today to show me where she would have me sleeping and how much space there was for my friends.

No mention of you. But it won't be long before she has a room for you too. I have a new word to describe her which I picked up from Paul.'

What's the word? Helen asked.

'The word is "needy," Declan said. 'She's needy and she never was that before. I mean she's becoming needy over the past year or so (196).'

Contrasting to how Helen had felt earlier about their mother at the beach, 'mellow' and 'sad', Declan points out to the recent development in their mother's 47straciz. It implies that perhaps Lily had begun to reach out for what actually mattered in her life, now that her business was successful. As discussed in the previous chapter, the venture of Computers seemed to have been an adaptive investment. Around two years after the death of her husband Lily was offering commercial courses in the local vocational school wherein the 'Wexford Computer Limited' had its seeds sown. Perhaps now, after its success and a new house of her own, she 47straciz the inevitable turns life had taken in the process. It seems, she wanted her kids to need her. A sense of emptiness struck her but of scarce use now that Helen was far from accessible. Declan seems to have noticed her being 'needy' even before the time she knew about his condition. And now it was more apparent when he chose to stay at Dora's house instead of Lily's.

This sounds relevant to a prior mention of Helen's fantasy earlier in the text. Helen had imagined that someday she would need a shelter in their old house like a refuge in need of comfort. She believed that her mother would take her in, telling her that her room was always there for her and that she could stay as long as she liked. But the fact, that the house was gone, it deprived Helen of a recourse in her mother. Now, before her lay the entire vision of the fantasy, as Declan was at her grandmother's doorstep for a sense of forgiveness and comfort.

The substitution of caregivers in Declan's life adds to the aching heart of his mother. It may not have single-handedly altered the course of action but definitely opened up 47stracizin manifestations to Lily. The narrative shows, Declan's friends, Paul and Larry, closer to him in difficult times than his actual family. A certain space created by their presence in Dora's house seemed more comforting for ailing Declan. They possibly knew more about Declan's life than his own family members and the fact stared Lily in her face. At one point, Lily and Paul get into a heated argument

when Paul intervenes in Lily's efforts to comfort her son. Lily apparently has an instant urge to wish Paul out of Dora's house. Paul takes charge of the situation stating loud and clear-

I'm here as long as Declan is here and you can take that written in stone, and I'm here because he asked me to be here, and when he asked me to be here he used words and phrases and sentences about you which were not edifying and which I will not repeat. He is also concerned about you and loves you and wants your approval. He is also very sick. So stop feeling sorry for yourself, Mrs. Breen. Declan stays here, I stay here, Larry stays here. One of us goes, we all go, and if you don't believe me, ask Declan (233).

Declan, Paul, and Larry can be clearly viewed as family without any of them romantically involved with the other. The three are sentimentally bonded, standing nature's trial together. This alternate form of kinship through the lives of three homosexual men is explored and beautifully brought out in the narrative. Another 'queer' instance of such orientation is implicated through Paul's association with Catholic gay men's group. His sexual identity does not alienate him from the Church. He tells Helen of his marriage ceremony with François that was performed by a catholic priest.

He changed into his vestments and said Mass and gave us Communion and then he married us. He used the word "spouse" instead of husband and wife. He had it all prepared. He was very solemn and serious. And we felt the light of the Holy Spirit on us, even though Declan thought this was the maddest thing he'd ever heard... (173).

The novel not only portrays alternative forms of kinship, but goes further to suggest a subversion of normativity through institutions such as religion and marriage. It will be apt to say that these sub narratives underlying the theme, play along the sharp ideological demarcations of family and society. They have a space of their own inculcated from within the stark contrasts. The space is indeed carved out from the divide between the land and the sea, the norm and the taboo, the natural and manmade, they develop on the borders. Every suppressed emotion is evoked, conspicuously screeching out from obscurity. The liminality of such spaces is

unintended but serves as fertile ground for healing and progress even in the darkest of situations.

The sound proofed prison like shed has been Jack's world until the sudden intimation of a larger world outside this Room. It sounds mindboggling to the child but nonetheless validated by the trust in his mother. Ma always seems to know the answers to everything. At the point where Ma's words defy their own content of truth, Jack inquisitively tags along with the new set of existing truth. He may be an extraordinarily courageous child for his age but is just as trusting and receptive as other children. His journey begins with Room, destined to a newer space in the outside world of which he is unaware until he is five. The novel's end is suggestive of a new space- apartment for him and Ma that re-establishes the essence of their previous Room (their world), only newer and altered fundamentally. The journey is indeed bigger than the destination, perhaps from a dysfunctional domestic space to a more functional one. The child and mother cross the borders of confinement not only literally but also metaphorically and rebuild their relationship. Their relationship suffers in due course of the spatial as well as temporal transition. Not that it affects their love and bond, but incorporates other elements/entities that previously did not exist for them.

Similar to *The Blackwater Lightship* in its pattern of transition, *Room* begins as a world of two, in the eleven by eleven foot room and ends on its resilient reformation. The narrator's voice becomes crucial in such a reading of the text. As in the case of Helen everything changed from Dora's house in Wexford, so for Jack things changed from the moment of revelation from his mother and further execution.

The discourse of margins is ubiquitous from geographical to personal. How much ever demarcating it may appear through political definitions, it upholds a sense of stracizing. The apparent pure identities from either sides of a border are rather force fed ideologies. They exhibit power play in the face of any form of resistance. Emma Donoghue's *Room*(2010) encompasses this feature along with the aforementioned. The captor tentatively regulates power by limiting the movement of 'Ma' and Jack. The psychosis behind the act of kidnap and imprisonment of the victim for years together is sidelined from the centre stage. The narrative does not delve into that aspect. It is clearly about the five year old child and his mother. The circumstantial upbringing of Jack is deprived of the mother's remotest choice. Jack

himself is circumstantially borne. Oblivious to the crudely harsh realities of his being, he is a respite to the reader from the inhumane backdrop of his storyline.

The extra-ordinary breakthrough of Jack and Ma from the Room is based on their undying faith in each other. The duo dismantles the shackles of the unlawfully imposed confinement. What follows through becomes the real deal. The prison like atmosphere had become a beautiful improvisation of limited faculties. It catered to Jack as closely as homes for other children under normal circumstances would. The intelligible schedule and activities 50stracizi by Ma kept Jack healthy and balanced through nearly cavemen conditions. They escaped the atrocities but simultaneously abandoned their home. Room spoke of the atrocities but also bound them unequivocally. With Room, they lost their home too. Their space was gone. Their cross-border venture was the dire need of the hour but the repercussions struck them once they came out.

Considering how the outside world affected their life (singular unit as Jack thought of himself and Ma), we see the protagonists suffering from separation anxiety. The separation is not only in context of the mother child relationship but also from the previous identity of the both. Regressive as it may sound that Ma was possibly anxious about her previous self in Room, the anxiety is in context of herself as the mother and not as the captive.

The prying eyes of the media, newspaper, television judges her situation and ordeal. She feels as if she's under perpetual scrutiny even after making it through a nightmare of a lifetime. She may have escaped the clutches of Old Nick's scrutinized supplies and bare minimum allowances. She breaks away from slavery but nonetheless falls into the constant perusal by society and media. Not only that, her own father refuses to accept Jack as family and breaks her daughter's heart.

The outside world serves as the 50straci space in the transformation through the rehabilitation phase. They reach out for the lost part of themselves as mother and child. Not that the current change was unwanted but that it had its own price to pay. They start off from Room and transition back to their secure abode and sense of shelter with a unique sense of space. This new concept in their lives offers them a space in the collective sense along with the individual.

Room is enslaving. So is the outside world. The third level of development in the process is the new apartment for Jack and Ma in the outside world. This is accompanied and influenced by Jack and Ma's last visit to Room. The last visit gives

Jack the much needed closure for him to move on. As he bids adieu to every component in room that accompanied him through his five years, he bids farewell to the part of him that is inseparable from Room (400).

Earlier in the novel, we have seen its tinge in Jack about the rat, the spider/web and how keeps little things from Ma. Even his narrative voice is his own-exclusively observant in nature where he talks about things in the room and about Ma (she's gone/ dizzy with painkillers for toothaches perhaps) about Old Nick and also in the outside about the health centre, doctor/staff, the T.V interviewer. Only he did not until they came out, that even Ma could have her own voice and her own thoughts. He had never learnt to entertain the idea of Ma's privacy, given the two meant the world to each other.

While in the room Jack's character is very considerate. He makes sure not to disturb Ma and manage the day by himself when Ma is 'gone'. She possibly suffers from bouts of depression or/and effects of painkillers doses for her teeth or/and menstrual cycles which is never directly addressed in the text. It seems to be deliberately kept out of Jack's knowledge probably left for the readers to decipher. These snippets provide us with Jack's discretion on giving Ma her space. His inquisitive little mind is unaware of precise reasons yet he lets her be, even at times when she seems to be "gone (75)" for more than a day.

The contrast in 51stracizing the physical measurements of the room is horrifying for Ma and matter of fact for Jack. Jack as a child occupies the 51straci space challenging the conventional idea of home and belonging. After their escape, he is a deemed source of abjection for Ma's identity and stability. Escaping the traumatic space did not set them free for good. They carried the complexities of their previous residence. The world on the outside, did not limit their movement within tangible measurements. It did shelter them like their previous provider. It did offer them psychiatric and rehabilitation assistance. But simultaneously, parts of the outside world rummaged in their captivity to provide fodder for public consumption. It is in this phase of disillusionment that Ma faces the extension of her trauma.

Drawing upon Julia Kristeva's idea of "abjection", the process comprises-excluding parts of oneself to establish one's integrity. It is a sense of 'otherness' that inculcates so as for us to exclude the maternal/mother- the object that has created us so we can construct an identity. The cast out facet of the identity becomes external to the subject. The "abject" according to Kristeva, exists somewhere between the subject

(oneself) and the object (that which has been cast off). The abject is neither the object nor the subject itself. It is situated at a place that precedes the '*symbolic order*'¹⁸ It therefore occupies a 52straci space.

Jack's world for a long time is largely dependent on his mother until its rupture when he has to leave Room with Old Nick. As soon as he enters the world for the first time, he corresponds to the whiff of newness in the air. He constantly thinks about his mother as his muse and source of strength. There is no casting off of his unitary identification with Ma. He has taken up the courageous venture just for his mother. The compact first hand experiences of being alone (without the physical presence of Ma) usher him to the process of abjection. Even though he keeps a track of Ma's tooth in his sock, being scraped on the road and bitten by the dog makes him bleed for the first time. He has never bled before this time. It exposes him to strange spectacles and responses.

"Don't move don't move don't move JackerJack stay stiff stiffstiff. I'm squished in Rug, I can't breathe right, but dead don't breathe anyway... The beep beep again, then the click that means Door is open. The ogre's got me, fee fie foe fum. Hot on my legs, oh no, Penis let some pee out. And also a bit of poo squirted out my bum, Ma never said this would happen. Stinky. Sorry, Rug. A grunt near my ear, Old Nick's got me tight... I count my teeth but I keep losing count... 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. I can't feel my arms. The air's different. Still the dustiness of Rug but when I lift my nose a tiny bit I get this air that's... Outside (171)"

However, Jack's experience of coming out into the Outside involves multiple levels of abjection, in Kristevan fashion, having to deal with corporeal fluids, fear, fantasies of dismemberment, and violence. It is in fact the soothing atavistic comfort of chewing one of his mother's teeth that gives him the courage to come out into a different material space. This also means that although Jack is now moving to the Outside and becoming aware of the world he still feels continuous with his mother's body and not separate from it. Jack says:

¹⁸ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection* (London 1997) p. 95

“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 Ma.’

“It’s called ‘Bitter Sweet Symphony,’ when I was thirteen I listened to it all the time... 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 (275).’

The idea of individual spaces creeps into the narrative as Jack discovers unknown facts about things. According to Foucault (1995), in disciplinary society, social command is constructed and regulated by a network which Althusser calls ideological and repressive apparatuses. These apparatuses prescribe norms, customs and 53straciz with the suppression of any alternate defiance. The systematic exercise of power through technologies can be seen on Jack. His corporeal presence under constant surveillance through measurements, new clothes, needles, mask etcetera. Various mechanisms of disciplinary control saturate his individual scope of development. They aggravate his uneasiness in the new world in the name of protecting him. The discomfort caused, weighs equally or possibly more on his mother. Jack reflects on the contrast of himself feeling safe and sound in *Room* and scared, *Outside*.

The *outside world* serves as a pragmatic platform for their transition. It entails a process of unlearning the past and re-learning all over again, not only for Jack but also for his mother. The article in the newspaper discovered by Jack read-

‘HOPE FOR BONSAI BOY. He is “Miracle Jack” to the staff at the exclusive Cumberland Clinic... product of his beautiful young mother’s serial abuse at the hands of the Garden-shed Ogre...still goes up and down the stairs on all fours like a monkey... degree of long-term developmental retardation(269).’

In the confinement of Room, Jack upheld a sense of freedom which seems to be curtailed in the outside world. Along with his mother, he notices people constantly after their back from the doctors, staff, the television people and the puffy haired interviewer. The institutional control watching them now was absent while they were in Room. The interesting reversal in perception takes place when Jack and his mother enter the realities of this society. The disciplinary mechanisms like the media, the hospital, and the police attempt to mark his body as messy and imperfect.

One of the days when Ma is “gone (301)”, Jack gets to meet Uncle Paul, Deane and Bronwyn for the first time. The day out, acquaints Jack with many a new thing along with his kin, the mall and his first raindrop. After he gets back, he finds his mother unconscious. She overdosed on her pills- a definite suicidal attempt. This leads to Jack spending his days at his grandmother’s place. His stay, opens up a whole new world to him. He is now without his mother around, mostly by himself. Even though the grandmother watches over him, it turns out to be the most drastic phase in his transitioning outside.

Jack’s grandparents’ house represents yet another disciplinary training space for Jack. He has to deal with the absence of his mother for the first time in his life. Despite repeated assurances from Grandma, he wonders what really went wrong with Ma.

““Are you just playing she’s alive? ...Because if she’s not, I don’t want to be either (316).”

‘Ma sings me songs but there’s no more of them anymore. She smashed my head on the table in Room Number Seven. She took the bad medicine, I think she was too tired to play anymore, she was in a hurry to get to Heaven so she didn’t wait, why she didn’t wait for me (320)?’”

This instance is primarily important for its climatic essence since it defines a rounded 54stracizing for the five year old child. The fact that his mother is an individual by herself, strikes his consciousness. He wonders if Ma is tired of having him around, accompanying him or precisely being his mother. Until now, the mother and child are seen to be struggling with the abrupt change (willingly) in their lives. Ma has been rooting back for her identity, freedom, family and the sense of home. In the process she assures Jack of their connection and caters to him unequivocally. Similarly Jack has been fighting insecurities and observing the drastic change around him. They move along in the struggle. They were together in the solace of Room. They were together in the execution of the escape. They remained together in fighting the multifaceted tossing by the society. But at this juncture of Ma’s consumption of bad medicines, Jack feels left out. It is beyond his comprehension why Ma would get at doing something willingly that would separate him from her. The chapter “Living” concludes the text and weighs massively in the journey of the protagonist. Besides an emotional read, it is serene in nature. The child is anxious but alone. He has the world

at his disposal but it means nothing to him without his mother who means the world to him. The deliberation in Ma's act and consequent stay over at Grandma's place is a quietly devastating 55stracizing for Jack.

In this episode, Jack learns more about the ways of the world. He gets stung by a bee, gets sunburnt and chapped, gets his first haircut, goes out with grandma and perceives people in the humdrum of life. He has his first pleasant interaction with a child named Walker, in the library after his weird encounter with the girl on the swing. He hugs Walker with joy and ends up knocking him down accidentally.

‘Also everywhere I’m looking at kids, adults mostly don’t seem to like them, not even the parents do. They call the kids gorgeous and so cute, they make the kids do the thing all over again so they can take a photo, but they don’t want to actually play with them, they’d rather drink coffee talking to other adults. Sometimes there’s a small kid crying and the Ma of it doesn’t even hear (358).’

A commentary on the materialist consumerism that has engulfed the human race at the turn of twenty-first century is heard in the narrator's voice. Also, his interesting insights on time explore the contrasts of time's scantiness in peoples' lives 'outside' and its plenitude while he and Ma lived in Room.

Things begin to change for Jack- they look different and feel different. During a fit of rage at Grandma for pulling him away from his “new friends (369)” at the store who wanted his autograph and after Grandma dropping the soccer ball that she was supposed to buy for him, Jack packs his “Dora bag (370)” and wished (roars) to get back to the clinic. ‘Steppa’ steps in and takes him to the ‘blow-up bed’. Jack searches for Ma's tooth under it and chews on the tooth. He notices a change and thinks- *“He (Tooth) doesn’t taste like anything anymore (371).”* The next day when Ma returns, he 55straciz *“She looks different but I don’t know how.”* Ironically, Jack is the one who got his hair chopped off for the first time which suggests considerable change of his looks. The cutting of his hair becomes symbolic to the cutting of the umbilical cord. He gets to establish a different identity from the one he has had so far, from the time of his birth. This relates to the process of “abjection” (Kristeva). He is elated to have Ma back, but on looking closely, the narrative reveals a shift in the perception and acceptance in Jack's life.

The experience with ‘Steppa’ carrying Jack on his shoulders during Jack's fit of rage (371), camouflages with the incident of Old Nick carrying Jack (rolled in the

rug) out of Room. Jack's instant defence mechanisms come forth. The spur of the moment evokes a critical scene from the past for Jack, and the only way he responds to it is by kicking and hitting as he had trained himself for special cases. As soon as 'Steppa' drops him on the 'blow-up bed', Jack 56straciz the peculiarity of the situation. He is able to then distinguish between the past and the present, Old Nick and Steppa and what is safe and unsafe. He 56straciz that things have changed.

When Ma calls their new apartment "Home (377)" he seems confused at the idea of calling a place home, they have never lived in. Ma teaches him how to bolt the door. It's a first of its kind for Jack since it puts the situation in stark contrast with their stay in Room. The inmates (Jack and Ma) had control to their own space unlike in Room, where the door opened at the wish of the captor. Further into the day Ma convinces Jack to bid farewell to breastfeeding. The day of shifting consists of a couple of instances occurring back to back that alter his state of adherence. Next on, he 56straciz during unpacking that he has lost 'Tooth (Ma's tooth)' and thinks *'I can't tell her I maybe lost a bit of her.'* *'I think maybe I did swallow him by accident. Maybe he's not going to slide out in my poo, maybe he's going to be hiding inside me in a corner forever (384).'* Later on Ma convinces him about the situation that it was alright. He is learning to let go of things from the past that mattered. It is difficult on him but he tries as he affirms his conviction of keeping intact the essence of those things.

Ma asserts her need to have a space at times that she could call just hers. Initially, he is averse to the idea but goes on to accept it. 'We practice being in two rooms and calling out to each other... When I'm in JACK'S ROOM and Ma's in MA'S ROOM, that's not so bad, only when she's in other rooms but I don't know which, I don't like that (383).'

 They go on to make what may be called a Bucket List for activities they have tried and would like to try.

In the process of adjusting into the new "home" Jack has an urge to visit 'Room' even for a minute. Ma's aversion to the idea fails to deter Jack and they end up visiting Room. When he stands in there with Ma he can sniff the whiff of change. He says that Room doesn't feel like Room anymore with the door open. He is touched with a sense of redemption at this last visit to Room and bids adieu to each occupant that emanated life before. It looks like a *"crater where something happened (401).'*" After having crossed the borders of the seemingly safest place in the whole wide world, it ceases to remain what it was.

The 'Outside' becomes the 57straci space between the past and its selective recovery in the form of a future. The pattern of progression in the plot from traumatic and adaptive as discussed in the previous chapter resonates with that in *The Blackwater Lightship*. The Outside serves in the healing of the survivors. From its moments of anticipation to convulsive breaks, *Room* offers the spectacle of a universal sense of domestic space.

‘Humans and bees should just wave, no touching. No patting a dog unless it’s human says OK, no running across roads, no touching private parts except mine in private. Then there’s special cases, like police are allowed to shoot guns but only at bad guys (274).’

Jack’s narrative voice makes space for interrogating socially constructed. He not only imbues life into inanimate objects but does so with utter simplicity. Beyond offering a lens to view the social set ups and cultural demeanour at large, it specifically locates the struggle and its overcoming on a subjective level.

The uncomfortable phase of children not being able to understand their parents or their actions is seen in both the texts. How they recoil and work towards it is different. For a five year old, the reception of parents’ misgivings is more forgivable (*Room*) than for an adult who has lost touch with the mother for years together (*The Blackwater Lightship*). However the both transition similarly beyond post-traumatic adaptations. The re-establishment of the respective domestic spaces attempts to exclude the dysfunctional aspects that inhabit their previous spaces. In a way they seem to be queering the social order in their own ways and through their own lenses. Anne Goarzin elucidates theoretically upon Trauma in “Articulating Trauma”, *Trauma et mémoire en Irlande: Perspectives on Trauma in Irish History, Literature and Culture* stating:

... while trauma is never a chosen experience and durably disseminates the sense of the self, it appears that there might be a possibility for healing in the choices operated in the narratives of trauma. One of the ways of working through trauma implies narrating it, whatever form this takes. This corresponds to an intermediary stage on the path to recovery, which is usually described clinically as follows: first, the establishment of safety, next remembrance and mourning, which then leads to reconnection with ordinary life. While the failure to

contemplate the past in narrative form results in trauma, with memories remaining outside the subject altogether and enacted as drama, at best – as opposed to 58stracizing and narrated by a subject who masters them – the narrative appears as one way to recover, and more precisely, to remember and mourn. It might sometimes achieve the liberating feat of enacting the original traumatic event.

Conclusion

The Mother as a subject of discussion stretches across disciplines from Humanities, Social Sciences and Natural Science. Motherhood primarily alludes to the source of creation and sustenance of life since times immemorial. It has evolved in the journey from regressive to radical channels of perusal.

The mother has traditionally been offered a respectable status through locating her ideal work-space in domesticity. Socially, culturally and individually, the nature of such a conception has undoubtedly changed over time. They are no more confined to a singular identity. Nonetheless, the process of becoming a mother largely entails the creation of a family. The family thus formed has a specific space for its functioning. This space wherein the family lives as a community is usually a hub of sentimentality and affection.

The Blackwater Lightship and *Room* are interesting in the light of the idea of family and the act of mothering therein. The mothers of the protagonists in both texts are the primary concern of the study, to begin with. The lives of the protagonists throughout are distinctly affected by the mother figure concerned. The child's point of view narrates the story to us. This work attempts to see the mother through and simultaneously beyond the child's perception. Besides the mother's contribution and influence in the child's life where she is the giver, her position as a recipient is of considerable importance. The act of mothering in the given context, tries on some levels to develop her narrative. Her experiences through turbulence may be hinted at in the texts, which have been elucidated upon in this dissertation.

The title of the dissertation suggests an analysis of the act of mothering in a dysfunctional space. The space thus concerned entails domestic connotations given the relationships talked about, are within the family. What makes such a space dysfunctional does not necessarily allude to the dysfunction in the family itself or its members. The circumstances of dwelling and interactions of the inmates render a distinct absurdity and discomfort to their home. What these dysfunctional aspects are, how they have come to be and how they transcend from the limitations of the dysfunction is the crux of this analysis.

The manner in which a space becomes dysfunctional, traverses from an understanding of what ideally a domestic space is, what it contains and what its

characteristic features are. The ones in question here stand out from the regular instances of a stable family.

The ideal family has been viewed with the backdrop of Article 41 of the 1937 Constitution of the Republic of Ireland. The mother is seen to be designated with her responsibility within home to contribute to the welfare of the nation at large. The movements thereafter on various social and political fronts that have been mentioned in the first chapter brought a shift in the actual lives in the women's position within the home as well as in the public sphere. Contemporary Irish fiction evolved in the representation of women and mothers from their upheld ideals, positions as mere wives and mothers to their plight and transcendence in the collective journey of individual or homosexual identities.

The domestic space in both texts explore the ideals of parenthood, family bonds, gender roles and their reversals, hetero-normativity versus homosexuality, belongingness, the psyche and identification of the self, the schism of past and present, symbolic representation of the space along with landscape, existentialism and resilience in human life. The greyness evident in Helen's perception and hidden behind Jack's charming being, fosters the explication.

After bringing forth what the dysfunctional aspects are, the psyche and proceedings of the individuals and their relationship are analysed. There is a prevalence of conflict throughout the texts. This conflict seems to be working at multiple levels simultaneously. The disturbed stability of the domestic space is coupled with the friction of the past and the present. This friction is largely with the self in the lives of the individuals that causes imbalance to take over.

The texts portray to its readers the ongoing friction in the lives and relationships of its character. The second chapter furrows through the spectacle of conflict in deciphering the cause of it. The reason behind the turbulent state appears to be trauma that inflicts the lives of the concerned. The trauma can be traced back to the occurrence of a tragic event in the individual as well as collective lives of the suffering. The characters unaware of their perpetual distress unintentionally extend the same to the ones around them. The tragic event that perpetrated trauma seems to be the father figures in *The Blackwater Lightship* and *Room*. The authors may have used the father figure as a tool to extend discomfort in the lives of their kin. By no means is Old Nick a father figure to Jack or husband to Jack's mother. His only reference to the context is in terms of his biological affiliations. He has for obvious

reasons been posited as a criminal. Nonetheless, the deliberate sidelining of this character from the centre stage despite inflicting deliberate and trauma speaks of his place within the narrative. Similarly in *The Blackwater Lightship* the father or precisely his death is the cause of remorse and subsequent uneasiness between the daughter and the mother. An accomplished man, true to his fatherly nature is shown to depart from the lives of his loved ones with an untimely demise. The tragic event sparks off a need for a stronger attachment and connection among the family members which they mistakenly neglect. This expounds the propensity of disregard for one another over the years. The inner catastrophe thus caused in dealing with the trauma affects the psyche and assembles memories of an unpleasant past. The individual and collective trauma has been brought out to compare the nature of its repercussions on the characters. The absence or subsequent loss of the father and male support instigate a sense of dysfunction in the respective domestic space.

The transgression from the limitations of thus caused dysfunction operates on a level between the inside and outside. Dora's house in Cush and similarly the outside in general comprising the clinic, Jack's grandmother's house offer a platform for transition through the identity crisis. The nostalgia of the past and discomfort of the present interweave to form an obscure state of reflection. The obscure state can be seen as a liminal space between a difficult past and a resolved future. It serves as an uncomfortable platform for the characters especially the protagonists to deal with. The very uneasiness seems to be a long due confrontation that results in outbursts and impulsive reactions. The heat of the space evokes deep seated trauma of the past and brings it in direct contact with the dissent of the present. The juxtaposition of anxiety is interesting to note. How Helen being anxious in the proximity of her mother stands contrasted with the separation anxiety in Jack when he and Ma are out of 'Room'. The two work in different directions yet in a similar pattern. The climax to a rounded liminalizing of making peace occurs in the liminality of both texts. Helen's difficulties began with the time she and Declan felt abandoned in the absence of their parent. This happened when they were at their grandmother's place in Cush. Helen felt unattended by her mother in the absence of any letter, news or communication. It was this place that had begun to change her drastically as an individual and it got worse after her father's death, as her mother withdrew completely. Ironically, this place became liminal in the transition of their relationships. Declan spending his last days in Cush, with his family around became pivotal to a reversing of the order. They

are healed in the process of the uncomfortable company of one another. Similarly for Jack, the moment of estrangement comes through his mother's attempt at suicide. There comes a shift in his understanding of a singular identity of himself and his mother. Along with day to day occurrences that were changing him and his outlook, his stay at his grandmother's place after 'Ma's' attempted suicide helped him make peace with the ways of the world.

The silence may not necessarily implicate absence and the society on the whole must endeavour to not only understand but accept and include the dogmatically excluded. The authors seem to thoroughly examine the idea of a certain past. The process of constant evolution is advocated through tropes and motifs. The self claimed righteous authority of larger institutions like the nation and the society may undermine the integrity of smaller units. The favoured demeanours of social life and designated responsibilities of the private, leads people to comprehend reality in a certain way. This fosters a kind of estranging anything that does not fit in. The Irish context of nationhood in *The Blackwater Lightship* and the social prying into the lives of 'Jack' and 'Ma' in *Room* are questioned through the narratives. The authors explore the often neglected aspects of identity making thereby drawing the readers' attention to ambiguities in interpretation of historical and personal events. The ideological stances on roles and identities of the family, their members and experiences are navigated through discourses of alterity and ambivalence. Human relations are fragile and vulnerable. The conflict within them or with external factors, demonstrate a perpetual transition in the individual lives involved. The authors' recurring characterization of the traditional family as distant brings out the dysfunctional. The supposed values that the social institutions seem to protect may occur in countless other forms than the privileged ones. The elemental bond and accountability in human relationships may transcend kinship and regular patterns. Thus present fluidity in nature retains its essence nonetheless and additionally expands the horizons of comfort and strength of relationships.

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