

## A Discourse Analysis of Oppression in the Novel *Room*

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#### ABSTRACT

It is believed that oppression is a result of patriarchy emphasizing the fact that men are regarded as more important person so that women are typically supportive of the man. Accordingly, the study applied Paulo Freire's theory as a concept to understand the oppression in human's lives. From his pedagogy, there is the fact that domination is a basic part of people's lives in every society. Oppression encompasses in various kinds of experiences such as physical, sexual, age, or intellectual exploitation, and some of these could be found in this novel. Also, it can be concluded that Paulo Freire's concept of oppression is applied to help those who are oppressed including youth and women and these types of persons are the main character in this novel that experience male domination. Hence, oppression in this novel is a result of male character's superiority showing through the means of sexual abuse and of unequal relation of power between male and female character, and it is hard for some people in the novel believing that Ma are related to Old Nick in term of husband and wife to identify Old Nick as the abusers of Ma's physically and mentally mistreatment.

#### บทคัดย่อ

เชื่อกันว่าการกดขี่เป็นผลมาจากแนวคิดปิตาธิปไตยที่ให้ความสำคัญกับผู้ชายซึ่งเป็นแบบฉบับที่ผู้หญิงที่ต้องสนับสนุนผู้ชาย งานวิจัยนี้ได้นำทฤษฎีของเปาโล แฟร์รี(Paulo Freire) มาเป็นแนวทางเพื่อทำความเข้าใจการกดขี่ในชีวิตมนุษย์ จากหลักการของเปาโล แฟร์รีระบุว่าอำนาจที่ใช้เพื่อการควบคุมนั้นจัดเป็นเรื่องธรรมดาในชีวิตของผู้คนในทุกสังคม การกดขี่มีหลายรูปแบบทั้งทางร่างกาย ทางเพศ อายุ ทางสติปัญญาล้วนได้รับการเอาเปรียบซึ่งถูกถ่ายทอดผ่านนิยายเรื่องนี้ ทฤษฎีของเปาโล แฟร์รียังถูกนำไปใช้เพื่อช่วยผู้คนที่ถูกกดขี่อันได้แก่ เยาวชนและสตรีซึ่งเป็นตัวละครหลักของเรื่องซึ่งประสบกับการใช้อำนาจควบคุมโดยผู้ชาย กล่าวคือการกดขี่ในนิยายเล่มนี้เป็นผลสืบเนื่องมาจากลักษณะที่ตัวละครเพศชายข่มขืนคนอื่นกว่าโดยแสดงออกมาในเรื่องของเพศและเป็นผลจากการที่ตัวละครเพศชายและเพศหญิงมีอำนาจไม่เท่ากัน และเป็นเรื่องที่ยากสำหรับใครบางคนในเรื่องที่เชื่อในความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างตัวละครทั้งสองที่จะระบุว่าตัวละครเพศชายได้ทำการทารุณตัวละครเพศหญิงทั้งทางร่างกายและจิตใจ

**Key Words :** Discourse Analysis, Oppression, Patriarchy

**คำสำคัญ :** การวิเคราะห์วาทกรรม การกดขี่ แนวคิดแบบปิตาธิปไตย

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## **Introduction**

Begin with a short summary of the plot, *Room* written in 2010 by Emma Donoghue is the title of the novel telling the story of a female character called “Ma” by her five-year-old son, Jack, that she is locked in a room where she is sexually abused until she gets pregnant. In *Room*, Old Nick, a male character, treats Ma and Jack as his property as how the room belongs to him. He gives them an unhealthy condition of living that Ma is not different from Old Nick’s object of sexual interest. Therefore, when Jack is five, Ma manages to escape by trick, and successfully they are out. In the outside, Ma and Jack receive much of public’s attention, for it is the first time for the boy jumping to the world of reality where as it is the point that Ma rejoins to the world that has changed. The reason that this novel is worth considering is that it is thematically related to the fact about women oppression, and it is translated into more than 30 languages, for example, German and Dutch educational editions. It also wins numerous awards both national and international; it is shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2010. The novel written in English is annually nominated as the winner of the Prize since 1969, so this prize assures the readers that the novel is notable and that a great number of copies are sold worldwide.

This is the second part of the analysis of the overall thesis, so the analysis mostly deals with the perspective of oppression. As a result of patriarchy, women are oppressed. The most dominant ideology found in the novel *Room* is patriarchy that women are ruled by men, so the story is about the discourse of women oppression. However, oppression is not the

only problem for women, so it is inevitably to address Paulo Freire whose theory is particularly involved with oppression, and his practical concept to end oppression is extended to a wide range of people, including women too. Reading Freire’s work is useful in order to get a general concept of oppression.

Since there is the dominant and the oppressed in discourse, for Paulo Freire whose theory is developed from Freud, Jung, Adler, Fanon and Fromm’s psychological theory of oppression, this kind of social effect is considered as a basic part of human’s lives (Torres, 2007). The underlying concept in Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972) is the fact that domination, aggression, and violence are inherent in all humankind and society. Freire explained that most of people have experienced some kinds of oppression or what is akin to oppression despite race, ethnicity, class, and gender, there is the tendency that people become oppressed and even, by themselves, oppress other people. The most important manners in which domination could be found encompasses sexism, racism, and class exploitation. In addition to this, religious beliefs, political affiliation, national origin, age, size, and physical and intellectual abilities are also exploited and dominated. Freire believed that human condition can be transformed by means of education, and that psychological and sociological confrontations are the ultimate goal of education that would contribute to the end of oppression. This is a vital task since Freire considered the way people start confronting or becoming conscious of the oppression make them as close to human being (Torres, 2007).

In addition, emphasizing Freire’s philosophical and methodological way of theorizing “critical

consciousness”, “dialogue”, and “praxis” (Freire and Faundez, 1989) is useful, and many theorists had proved this (Lee, 1994). Works like that of Wallerstein (1992), Wallerstein, Sanchez-Merki and Dow (1997), about youth empowerment, with abused women by Mann (1987), relating worker health and safety (Weinger and Lyons, 1992), in English as a Second Language (ESL) programmes (Auerbach and Wallerstein, 1987), community health organising and education by Kiilian (1988), Merideth (1994), Minkler and Cox (1980), Minkler (1997), entries of homelessness (Breton, 1991; Lee, 1989; Ovrebo, Ryan, Jackson and Hutchinson, 1994; Sachs, 1991; Yeich, 1996), from social work education (Gutierrez et al., 1998), to macro practice with communities of color (Gutierrez and Lewis, 1997; Rivera and Erich, 1992) are some examples of application of Freire’s theory (Carroll and Minkler, 2000).

Drawn from these works cited in Carroll and Minkler’s investigation of Freire’s Message for social workers: Looking back, looking ahead (2000), it highlights contribution down to those who are at social risk. Let consider these titles, such as “youth”, “women”, “worker”, “language”, “education”, “homeless”, and “color people” are relevant to theories reviewed from the beginning, it is evident that these people are somehow alienated, exploited, and abused; in other words, these are the works with the oppressed people. It is evident that people are in the same way disturbed by oppression, so Freire considers oppression inherent in most of people. Their experiences of oppression are different.

Women as a subject, it is noted that women are looking for the environment where they could feel

more comfortable to discuss about their problems, as their lives have been affected by racism, fears of sexual assault, and exploitation. For example, women were charged by local merchant high fees for check cashing, or a director of a local city recreation sold children drugs (Parson, 1991 cited in Carroll and Minkler, 2000). Positively, when women could feel that their expressed situations have been heard, they are in new departure to demystify their historical situations and to bring about solutions.

In the novel *Room*, the female main character, named Ma, is oppressed, so it is worth considering the form of oppression. Oppression is the concept of male superiority, and his supremacy forced women to endure bodily abuse. The oppressor expresses his domination and power by means of sexual behavior (Wood, 2004), so men exploit women as they are to please them as sexual toys. Therefore, it is believed that the concept of patriarchy is the main problem of oppression (Eisler, 1988 cited in Romney, Tatum & Jones, 1992). Romney, Tatum, and Jones believe that the phenomenon of oppression brings about mental problems since people who are oppressed are affected by fear, uncertainty, and ignorance. It can be summarized that when women are oppressed, they experience dreadful moment, ambivalence, and self-blame. Men play with women for their pleasure; they are expressing their power through a close intimacy which affects the feeling of women. Accordingly, women become mentally ill; they are afraid, unsure, and guilty.

Oppression can be understood as unequal relation of power between men and women. Men can exercise his power over women is the general understanding

held by many men who use it to maintain their superiority (Shields & Milne, 1975 cited in Holmes, 2000). However, it is believed that women are related to men, and this intimacy causes uncertainty in many women to identify men as their oppressors (Kedgley, 1971 cited in Holes, 2000). The difference between men and women is their power, for men believe in living with power while women are conceived as the powerless. Men can be identified as the oppressors, but to identify this is difficult for some women who understand that women are related to men, in other words, their relation are too closed to differentiate men's affection from men's cruel intention which finally will lead these women into uncertainty.

Although women are not recognized as a person who has power, they are not born to submission. According to the fact that men and women relations are socially determined, feminist contests that they are false ideas. Rather feminists are interested in men and women relations as natural, and they call for equality between men and women (Moffe, 1992 & Pateman, 1989 cited in Holmes, 2000). It can be understood that feminists believe in the natural ability between male and female; they are naturally equal, so a person's power should not be determined just because of this person is a man, and if the person is not, this person deserves powerless position in discourse. In other words, if the person is female, she deserves respect and trust in her own ability.

In conclusion, this part of the analysis of *Room* focuses on Paulo Freire's theory of oppression, and extends his concept to explain oppression of a female character in *Room*. Also, the analysis applies feminist's theory that challenges men supremacy resulting in women's oppression and psychological

problem, and relates the feminist's thought to the way the female character portrays the quality of being equal.

### **Objectives of the study**

The object of this study is to find out the dominant ideology presented in this novel, so that it can be explained how the female character is oppressed by the male character. Also, the analysis of this study aims at giving the explanation of the cause of oppression in this female character, and it is intended to relate how the oppression affects this female character. Consequently, it can be specifically stated that the main research question is what the dominant ideology is found in the story and how this ideology is presented.

### **Methodology**

The analysis uses the theory of Paulo Freire's theory to conceptualise a broad understanding of oppression in human's lives, and then it uses the theory about the oppression to explain this novel. This research is a descriptive study describing how the dominant ideology is presented according to the review of theory.

### **Results**

Oppression is considered as one aspect in discourse. Patriarchy causes oppression of women to exist in discourse, so in *Room* it is Old Nick's oppression of Ma. Jack, who was born in this room, and his mother, Ma, who is kidnapped from her family, they live their lives in a small room that seems to be well-prepared for their confinement. There's nothing much to do in this room for one day, so all of their activities is day after day repeated. Singing is one of the activities for them, but I understand

that she sings because she wants to send a message to the readers. Therefore, I do a research, and I have found that the song that they sing is problematic. Torres (2007) believes that oppression is a basic part in human's life. I begin explaining Freire's concept of oppression with a song that Ma and Jack sing for pleasure when they are in a room. This song indicates the social fact about freedom of the black. It is the song named "Swing low, sweet chariot". It is believed that this song refers to the story about the black people in America. They had been slaves for over a hundred years, and they had no hope in life. Therefore, the only hope is their belief in afterlife, they believe that they would go back to heaven by the chariot sent from above to take them to heaven like Elijah-a person who was treated badly from the heartless queen. The black believes that the vehicle sent down from the heaven to take those whoever have been good persons during their life's time, whether they are the rich or the poor; the nobleman or the servant. The most important thing is that either slave or lord has equal right to go to heaven. By the time the black in America searched for freedom from the south to the north of the country, they used this song to represent the symbol of freedom. Ma and Jack are not different from the slaves because they are imprisoned, so they want to be free. The song shows that people do not have equal right. If this is the song of colored people, it is related to the fact about minority group of people. Therefore, if we consider this point carefully, the story is talking about groups of people who have been oppressed in this world, and from the theory people who are oppressed also include women and children. In *Room*, Ma represents the oppressed woman while Jack represents the oppressed children.

Based on Freire's concept of oppression as a basic part of human's life, this is also shown in Ma's conversation in her interview with the television show.

Also, Ma is asked to have an interview on TV, and when the interviewer shows that it is surprising this situation should not happen to Ma, the woman says that this is a common problem that can be found in this society. Ma says that the social problem about woman oppression, specifically rape, or slavery is just an old story. I understand that the author explicitly warns that people should be aware of these social problems. From Ma's representation of the author's thought, it can be understood that, in case of Ma, it is sexual slavery. Slavery remains in the society for ages. Ma describes that people are isolated in prison, and kids are also exploited and raped by their fathers. People elsewhere are having the same kind of these problems, so Ma's story is not new but different. Ma's answer proves that Freire's concept of oppression is convincing.

According to Carroll and Minkler (2000), Freire's concept of oppression is helpful especially for those who have been oppressed. Significantly, Freire's theory is applied to women since their lives are affected by sexual assault and exploitation. In this story, Ma is kidnapped when she is on her way to the college. She is deceived by Old Nick's trick, and she is forced to become unconscious before she finds herself locked in Room where the story of oppression begins. The story is linked to other similar stories, so at this point it could be that oppression is considered universal. These stories are relevant to oppression because the main characters in those stories are also women. They are not just women in general, but they are also women under oppressive condition.

In addition, the two stories mentioned above are Alice in the Wonderland and The Mermaid that Ma tells Jack to convince him to believe that there is the

world outside behind this room. Alice and the Mermaid are also two subjects of oppression. Alice has a problem that she is differentiated from the people in the wonderland whereas the mermaid has a more similar story to Ma and Jack that she is taken from the ocean, and she has to live with a fisherman. After that, she gets pregnant, and gives birth to a boy. However, she does not seem to be happy because every time, the fisherman goes fishing, she tries to find her magic comb because the comb can help the mermaid to go back to the sea which finally she can find it and runs away as Ma and Jack. I consider the time and the character of these three stories significantly related to women oppression. Firstly, Ma's situation takes places in a contemporary world, for there are such indicators as television show, facebook, and music player or MP3 while Alice's and the mermaid's circumstances happens in the past. Alice in Wonderland is written in 1865, and the mermaid is written in 1700s. Considering the time of these three stories, it shows that they happen in the different time, but it reveals that both old and recent story reveal the way people are treated differently and exploited. In term of the character, the main characters of these three stories are female characters, the Mermaid, Alice, and MA; they are all women. Hence, whether it is in the past or present it seems women have oppressive moment in their lives as it is presented in these three female characters from different stories that is told by Ma to convince Jack to believe that both Ma and Jack can have better lives if they are not locked in this room.

It can be concluded that it is not only Ma who is oppressed in discourse but other women, in *Room* the author uses the representations of Alice and the Mermaid, are also oppressed. I understand that the

stories of Alice and the mermaid are fictional; in other words, their stories are unreal as well as the story of Ma which is partly based on true story. Despite its unreal condition, the stories of the Mermaid and Alice are retold to Jack by Ma, so they become real as Jack are too young to distinguish a real person from a character in the books. Also, in *Room*, the author uses present tense in storytelling; it makes the whole story remained up-to-date. When reading, the story maintains a sense of reality as it is happening by the time it is read. Therefore, *Room* represents the concept of women who are oppressed which gets along to Freire's.

From the very beginning, I have discussed earlier that patriarchy in discourse causes oppression to exist, and in *Room* Old Nick's power oppresses Ma and Jack in several ways, including rape, abuse, and mental harm. According to Romney, Tatum and Jones (1992), oppression comes from superiority or domination. To be more specific, some of the problems that affect women lives are rape, domestic violence and sexual harassment, and social stereotyping such as domestic labour. In the story, when Ma was in the room, she had been raped by Old Nick many of times. It is narrated when Jack hear the sound of the bed. For instance, Jack says, "Bed's loud, that's him getting in." And "I put Blanket over my head and press my ears so not to hear. I don't want to count the creaks but I do (p.73, chapter 2)." From Jack's narration, it implicitly shows that the presence of Old Nick in *Room* is always engaged in sexual activity. It has been five years since the day Ma is disappeared without trace, and she is kept in *Room* as Old Nick's object. Ma tells Jack that Old Nick thinks of them as one of his properties as how he owns this room. Old Nick thinks that



everything in the room belongs to him so that he can do whatever he wants. Therefore, Ma's captivity is related to Old Nick's sexual abuse. The male character keeps the female character as he wants her to treat him as he deserves it. Consequently, when the male character place himself as the rules for the female character, this woman become dependent and oppressed in many aspects.

Fear, uncertainty, and ignorance are considered the effects of oppression (Romney, Tatum and Jones, 1992). These feelings are expressed by Ma. Jack says that nothing can make his mother sacred except Old Nick. It could be that Ma has experienced something bad from Old Nick, ranging from abduction, attack, confinement, to rape, so she is too afraid of him. Ma describes Old Nick as a robot that he just looks like human, but there is nothing inside him. Ma has no options, and she is subjectively accommodated in Room. I also consider Jack as the oppressed based on the concept of oppression. It is clear that Old Nick oppresses Ma, and his oppression makes Ma fear. However, Jack is too affected by oppressive process. Old Nick's oppression seems not to be direct for Jack because he lives with this condition since he was born. The way Ma is oppressed is frequently acknowledged but not fully realized by Jack. Jack sometimes says Old Nick is not real since he always sees Old Nick in the distance, and there is no interaction between them at all. Accordingly, Jack prefers to stay in the room even though he is not certain about what he is told by his mother about the room and the outside. In reference to the point I discussed about sex slavery, it is such public ignorance about oppression that remains the process of oppression in the background of the society. It is presented in the utterance of the television

show's interviewer when she says that Ma is an extraordinary young woman with an extraordinary tale. The interviewer uses the word "extraordinary"; it means that for the audience oppression is unusual phenomenon, but for Ma it is actually the same old story as I have addressed earlier when Ma has an interview with the TV show that the story of people who have been oppressed in this society can be found in the fact about slavery or child's labour, so her life in this confinement is not something to be surprised. It shows that oppression has not largely been acknowledged in public if the room is considered as a small part of the bigger discourse-outside or public when it is described as lots of rooms remaining close to each other, but it is only this room that remains uncovered. To conclude this point, *Room* includes several feelings affected by oppression, and these feelings are fear, uncertainty, and ignorance.

Holmes (2000) cited Shields and Milne (1975) that oppression is a result of understanding of the difference between men and women. That is, men use power and women live without it, and power is a tool to create men unity. However, it is noted that for many women it is not easy to distinguish men as oppressors because there is a social attitude about the close relation between men and women (Kedgley, 1971 cited in Holmes, 2000). To be more specific, the relation between men and women may refer to their close intimacy, marriage, or men's and women's duties in the family or in the society for example.

I have already discussed the fact men use power to oppress women to sustain men's superiority, then I pay attention to the fact that social attitude about women's relation to men. The understanding makes it

difficult for many women to distinguish men as the oppressors. From Ma's interview with the television show, it also reflects that some women find it difficult to distinguish men as the oppressors. One question during the interview is about Ma's relation to Old Nick. The interviewer asks Ma,

"When you think about your captor now, are you eaten up with hate? She waits. "Once you've faced him in court, do you think you'll ever be able to bring yourself to forgive him" (p. 235, Chapter 4).

Ma replies that she does not think it is her priority, for Ma uses the word "priority" in her answer. It shows that it is not her role to be sympathetic about Old Nick. Before this Ma firmly says that for her there is no relation between Jack and Old Nick, and when she answers this question, her eyes become tight showing her strong feeling of certainty. Ma represents that women are not supposed to be supportive. It can be concluded that Ma understands how she becomes oppressed in *Room*, but from the interview it shows that oppression remains obscure for people many of whom still believe in women's relation to men. Specifically, the interviewer says that for many women they think that Jack and Old Nick are related to each other in term of father and son although Ma does not want to accept this point. Instead of focusing on how cruel Old Nick is; how he can do this to a woman, some women in the story and the interview try to relate the connection of these three character, Ma, Jack, and Old Nick, so it seems that they support the fact that Ma should forgive Old Nick as he is her husband and Jack's father. So this shows that when women are oppressed or when there is the oppression in discourse, the oppressor receives an excuse of doing

the wrong thing so that the process of oppression continues affecting the persons who are oppressed.

So far, I have accounted for the Freire's concept of oppression. In *Room* this concept can be understood from a song titled "Swing low, sweet chariot" and Ma's interview with the television show. From these two issues, there is the fact about slavery. People have long been oppressed in this world, and slavery remains social problem since ancient time. Oppression does not immediately happen in *Room*, but it also exists elsewhere according to Ma's answer in the interview. The Freire's concept of oppression is related to people who are oppressed, and Ma and Jack represent two groups of people who are oppressed. Ma represents a group of women while Jack's representation can be categorised in a group of youth. Oppression is considered women problem, specifically rape in *Room*, and this kind of oppression brings about fear, uncertainty, and ignorance. To understand the oppression needs to consider the fact about the difference between men and women. In *Room* Ma is oppressed by Old Nick's power, so I understand *Room* as a discourse of women oppression because it is not only Ma who is oppressed in this story. The author also relates Ma's experience in the room to the stories of Alice in the Wonderland and The Mermaid. Alice's experience is more like Jack's experience, for they are getting bigger in the wrong place where they both are treated badly. Whereas the Mermaid's experience is similar to Ma's because they both are taken away from their home, and they need to live with the man until both of them get pregnant before they could run away from the domination of the man. These related stories are concerned about women experiences, for the main characters, as well as Ma in *Room*, are female in these



two stories. Retelling of these stories remains Alice and the Mermaid lively as it is really happening in the same time, and it can be understood that oppression starts from the historical moment when the time among these three stories is considered, it shows that women are oppressed in the past, and at this moment we are reading the story about *Room*, women are also oppressed by men. To be more specific, oppression comes from male domination, and in *Room* it can be specified that Old Nick's as the oppressor, he exercises his power over Ma. Additionally, I understand oppression in *Room*, Alice, and the mermaid in term of ideology discourse so that it can be related back to the concept of discourse. The reason that marks the oppression ideological is the fact that these stories are not real events, so ideology or patriarchy in discourse is not concrete but conceptual. If ideology is understood as only a concept, sometimes false (See p.7), it can be criticised, and this can lead to a change in the relations of power in discourse.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

The main focus of the analysis is on the female character named "Ma", so it is interesting for the further study to shift the focus to another main character, I suggested, "Jack", a son of this women who is raped by the man in the story. The reason that it is interesting to examine this character is because he also experiences some kinds of oppression in this novel, but he doesn't realize its effects. Moreover, Jack is the narrator of the whole story, so everything he tells the readers come from his view point. Therefore, it is interesting to use Jack as the centre of the analysis to see whether there are any differences of

the ideological impacts between Jack and his mother or not.

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