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The Reintegration of Anomie Portrayed in *Room* by Emma Donoghue

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Abstract

This study analyzes the social conditions that drove Ma, the mother in Emma Donoghue's novel Room (2010), to attempt suicide after escaping seven years of captivity. The novel is narrated from the perspective of Jack, Ma's five-year-old son, whose viewpoint frames every event, including his mother's psychological breakdown after their escape. While previous research has mostly interpreted Ma's crisis as a continuation of captivity trauma, this study argues that her breakdown is better understood through Émile Durkheim's (1897/1951) concept of anomie the collapse of normative coherence that leaves an individual without a stable social foundation. Using qualitative literary analysis, this study closely examines the post-escape sections of the novel, focusing on Ma's encounters with her family, a medical clinic, and the media. The findings suggest that the conflicting expectations imposed simultaneously by these institutions render Ma's reintegration structurally destructive rather than restorative. Her suicide attempt thus emerges not as a private act of despair but as a social fact produced by her position within a current that fails to accommodate her new identity. Her survival, however, is sustained not by institutional recovery but by the relational bond between Ma and Jack, which functions as the novel's balancing structure. This study contributes a Durkheimian sociological reading of Room, an approach not yet developed in existing literary scholarship on the novel.

1. Introduction

Suicide is not simply an individual act. Behind every case lies a mix of social pressures, unfulfilled expectations, and the emotional burden of feeling as though there is nowhere to turn. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2023) reports that more than 700,000 people die by suicide each year, making it the fourth leading cause of death among individuals aged 15 to 29. Durkheim's foundational work, Suicide (1897/1951), was the first to systematically argue that suicide is not simply a psychological act, but a social phenomenon shaped by the measures by which individuals are integrated into, and regulated by, their societal structures (Hodwitz & Frey, 2016).

Durkheim identified four types of suicide, each corresponding to a different relationship between the individual and society. Egoistic suicide occurs when a person is too loosely connected to their community, thereby losing the sense of meaning provided by a collective sense of belonging. Altruistic suicide, in contrast, occurs when integration is too strong, and the individual sacrifices themselves for the perceived good of the group. Fatalistic suicide results from excessive regulation, when social norms constrain the individual to such an extreme that existence itself feels suffocating.

Anomic suicide, however, results from the breakdown of social regulation, when the norms that typically structure an individual's expectations and behavior collapse or become incoherent. The resulting normless state leaves the individual without a stable framework for understanding obligations, desires, and their place in the world (Kar & Singh, 2023). It is this fourth type that most accurately describes Ma's condition in Emma Donoghue's novel, *Room* (2010).

Emma Donoghue's novel, *Room* (2010), portrays these pressures with extraordinary clarity. The novel tells the story of Ma, a young woman who was kidnapped at the age of nineteen and held captive for seven years in a soundproof garden shed, where she raised her son, Jack, completely inside that enclosed space. What makes the novel analytically interesting is not the imprisonment itself, but what happens after the escape. Ma remained psychologically functional for seven years inside "Room," building Jack's world with care and purpose. Her breakdown only began after she returned to a society that did not know what to do with her. A television commentator reduced her maternal role to that of a symbolic victim: "*at a symbolic level, Jack's the child sacrifice, cemented into the foundations to placate the spirits.*" (Donoghue, 2010, p. 254).

His own father frames this erasure as a personal issue: Jack "*I shouldn't be and then Ma wouldn't have to be Ma*" (Donoghue, 2010, p. 223). Both moments occur after the escape, not during the captivity, suggesting that the source of Ma's psychological crisis is social, not simply traumatic.

Previous studies on "Room" have analyzed Ma's crisis through the lens of captivity trauma and narrative form (Lorenzi, 2017), as well as mother-child bonding dynamics and the inside/outside dichotomy (Albert, 2019). These

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contributions are valuable, yet they typically interpret the post-escape period as an extension of the effects of captivity, rather than as a result of specific social conditions. No previous study has directly applied Durkheim's anomic suicide theory to the post-escape period in "Room" to trace how the collapse of normative coherence within Ma's social environment creates conditions for suicidal behavior. This is the gap that this study fills.

Therefore, this study explores how society's response to Ma during the post-escape period reflects the conditions theorized by Durkheim (1897/1951) as anomie, and how this contributes to her suicidal behavior. The novelty of this study lies in its reading of "Room" through a Durkheimian sociological framework, an approach not yet explored in existing literary studies of this novel. This approach allows the sequence of events following the escape to be understood not simply as a personal disaster, but as the result of a specific and identifiable social structure.

2. Method

This study uses a qualitative approach to analyze the state of anomie experienced by the character Ma in Emma Donoghue's novel "Room" (2010). Qualitative research is considered appropriate in this context because it prioritizes depth of interpretation, thereby allowing the researcher to explore how social phenomena manifest in literary narratives (Creswell, 2008). The primary data for this study is the complete text of the novel "Room" by Emma Donoghue (2010), with attention given specifically to the post-escape sections, scenes involving media coverage, family reactions, encounters with institutions, and the development of Ma's psychological condition leading to her suicide attempt. Secondary data consists of peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and theoretical texts that support the analytical framework.

Primary data is analyzed using Durkheim's (1897/1951) theory of anomic suicide, which examines how the breakdown of social regulation and normative coherence can drive individuals toward self-destructive behavior.

Data collection was conducted through intensive and repeated readings of the novel. Data analysis was then carried out in two stages. First, the selected sections were analyzed through Durkheim's anomie theory (1897/1951) to identify how the accumulation of social rejection collapsed the normative framework that kept Ma oriented within the social world. Second, these findings were organized to map the progression from social dysfunction to suicidal behavior, with all data organized by page reference and research questions to maintain analytical transparency.

3. Results and Discussion

Ma's first social encounter following her escape was not a moment of relief but one of immediate rejection, and it occurred before she had even left the hospital setting. When Ma introduced Jack to her father for the first time, Grandpa could not remain in the same room. Rather than welcoming his daughter's return, he reduced

his grandson to something he could not face:

> *"I can't be in the same room. It makes me shudder."*
> *"There's no it. He's a boy. He's five years old," she roars. (Donoghue, 2010, p. 195)*

The word "it" marks the rupture. In Grandpa's framing, Jack is not a person but a reminder of the violence that produced him. Ma's response is not merely a grammatical correction; it is a defense of the maternal identity she had constructed across seven years of captivity. What makes the scene destructive is not only the rejection itself but its timing: the first family member Ma encountered after her escape was unable to separate her child from her trauma.

In doing so, Grandpa communicated implicitly that her survival was tolerable, but her motherhood was not, and that the two could not coexist in his presence. Albert (2019) identifies the mother–child bond as the novel's primary existential structure, the axis upon which both characters' sense of reality is organized. When the first-person Ma encounters refuse to acknowledge that bond, the consequence is not simply a personal wound; it is the collapse of the first social structure that should have supported her reintegration.

This dynamic extends beyond Grandpa's initial reaction. The family home, which should have functioned as a restorative space, became instead a setting in which Jack's existence was persistently treated as an ethical problem. The novel illustrates this through a media statement that enters the domestic sphere.

> *"But surely, at a symbolic level, Jack's the child sacrifice." (Donoghue, 2010, p. 254)*

The statement recasts Jack as evidence of what Ma should have avoided, and recasts her motherhood as a form of compromised survival. Jack himself absorbs and articulates what he overheard from his grandfather:

> *"I shouldn't be and then Ma wouldn't have to be Ma." (Donoghue, 2010, p. 223)*

The logic is precise: Jack's existence constitutes Ma's identity as a mother, and that identity is one the family cannot integrate. For Ma, the home that should have been her first safe space became her first site of judgment.

Rather than easing the pressures Ma encountered within her family, the clinical environment intensified them through a different mechanism. The clinic did not control Ma through violence, as Room had, but through procedure. This difference in method did not alter what was taken from her: the conviction that her needs, rather than institutional categories, determined the shape of her care. When Ma breastfed Jack during a visit and a staff member interrupted her, the exchange that followed was telling:

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"I'm nursing my son, is that OK with you, lady?" (Donoghue, 2010, p. 138)
"Room, we're just following the protocol for cases like this." (Donoghue, 2010, p. 142)
"Oh, you see lots of cases like this here, do you?" (Donoghue, 2010, p. 142)

The phrase "cases like this" is the operative element. It does not address Ma as an individual; it classifies her as a category, transferring authority from her specific needs as a survivor to a pre-existing institutional rulebook. Ma immediately recognizes the absurdity and responds with sarcasm. The doctors acknowledged they had not handled comparable cases, yet the protocol was applied regardless. Institutional management extended further into the mother–child relationship itself: clinic schedules restricted the time Ma and Jack could spend together, and the narrative implies that even after they returned home, Jack was left alone because Ma had to attend a medical procedure.

As Lorenzi (2017) argues, Room persistently interrogates whether clinical and cultural frameworks genuinely benefit survivors, or whether they instead reinforce external authority over how experiences are named and managed. Albert (2019) further demonstrates that the demands of the outside world repeatedly threaten to fracture the mother–child bond, which functions as the novel's primary mechanism of recovery. At the clinic, protocols displace relationships, and classifications displace recognition.

The television interview became the point at which every preceding pressure converged in a single act of public judgment. Conducted shortly after Ma had faced rejection from her father and procedural indifference at the clinic, the interview was framed as a platform for her to share her story. It rapidly became an interrogation of her choices as a mother. The interviewer asked whether Ma had ever considered surrendering Jack:

"But did you ever consider asking your captor to take Jack away? To leave him outside a hospital, say, so he could be adopted?" (Donoghue, 2010, p. 205)

The question reframes abandonment as the more loving act, positioning Ma's decision to keep her son as selfishness rather than sacrifice. Ma responded with the only answer that mattered to her:

"He had me. He had a childhood with me, whether you'd call it normal or not." (Donoghue, 2010, p. 205)

The interviewer did not accept this and pressed further:

"Every day he needed a wider world, and the only one you could give him got narrower. You must have been tortured by the memory of everything Jack didn't even know to want. Friends, school, grass, swimming, rides at the fair…" "Why does everyone go on about fairs?" Ma's voice is all hoarse. "When I was a kid I hated fairs." The woman does a little laugh. Ma's got tears coming down her face, she puts up her hands to catch them.

(Donoghue, 2010, p. 206)

The implication was clear: a better mother would suffer more visibly and prioritize her child's normality over their bond. Ma began to cry; Jack ran toward her from across the set. What breaks Ma here is not a single cruel question but the recognition that the public, like her father and the clinic before it, cannot receive her story on her own terms. As Lorenzi (2017) identifies, this constitutes external pressure on trauma discourse: Ma realizes that the rejection she faces is not personal but structural.

These pressures do not operate in isolation. They accumulate, and their accumulation produces something qualitatively different from each pressure considered alone. What the novel traces across its narrative arc is the progressive destruction of the normative frameworks that ordinarily allow a person to locate themselves within a social world, the condition Durkheim (1897/1951) terms anomie: not the absence of norms, but their collapse into incoherence. The novel captures this directly through Ma's interior voice. In conversation with Dr. Clay, she states:

"It's perverse. I was craving company. But now I don't seem up to it." (Donoghue, 2010, p. 271)

She does not say she dislikes people; she says that the desire to connect persists but something between her and that possibility has broken down. Elsewhere she tells him:

"Most days. Jack's enough for me." (Donoghue, 2010, p. 271)

For Ma, the dysfunction operates on multiple fronts simultaneously: the norm of the ideal victim, the norm of ideal motherhood, the norm of kinship propriety, and the norm of clinical compliance. No single response can satisfy all four at once, and the attempt to navigate between them produces a condition Lee (2025) terms normative dissonance, the simultaneous pressure of conflicting norms from incompatible social worlds. Carrabine (2018) describes anomie as arising when institutional structures collapse, producing dislocation and futility; Willis (1982) adds that for Durkheim this condition reflects not merely a lack of norms but the failure of solidarity-based relationships to develop or endure.

For Ma, the relational disruptions introduced by family, clinic, and media cumulatively dismantle the regulatory framework that had, paradoxically, kept her oriented during captivity.

The culmination of these pressures arrives not as a sudden dramatic event but as the endpoint of a traceable pattern. Jack's narrative renders it through accumulating dread rather than direct statement:

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When she switches on the light and looks at Ma she doesn't say OK, she picks up the phone and says, "Code blue, room seven, code blue." I don't know what's, then I see Ma's pill bottles open on the table, they look mostly empty. Never more than two, that's the rule, how could they be mostly empty... I'm screaming "Ma" as loud as I can but it's not loud enough to wake her. (Donoghue, 2010, p. 216)

Jack cannot articulate the event in adult terms, but he registers that what he is witnessing exceeds anything in his previous experience. The emergency, the code blue, the rushing staff, Jack dragged into the corridor, is rendered not as a medical crisis but as a child's loss of access to the only source of order his world has possessed. When Grandma tries to reassure him, Jack's response reveals the existential stakes of the mother–child bond:

"Are you just playing she's alive? Because if she's not, I don't want to be either." (Donoghue, 2010, p. 218)

"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?" (Donoghue, 2010, p. 221)

Jack cannot name the act, but he articulates its consequence as abandonment. Viewed through Durkheim's (1897/1951) framework, the suicide attempt is not a private act of despair but a social fact produced by Ma's position within conflicting social currents. The pattern is traceable: after her father's rejection, Ma withdrew; after the clinic's protocols, the withdrawal deepened; after the television interview, it became prolonged. Kar and Singh (2023) redefine anomic suicide as arising from the collapse of the social standards that ordinarily provide direction in life.

In Room, those standards do not disappear; they multiply and conflict until they become irresolvable. Hodwitz and Frey (2016) further note that the regulatory mechanisms whose failure drives anomic suicide are gendered: the norms Ma cannot fulfill, ideal victimhood, ideal motherhood, ideal femininity, are categories that the outside world has simultaneously elevated and rendered impossible to inhabit.

The rehabilitation period that follows is conveyed in a clinical register that is at once reassuring and depersonalizing. Grandma tells Jack:

"She's turned the corner." (Donoghue, 2010, p. 229)

Institutional language names Ma as a clinical state rather than a relational presence. It is only the language of the mother–child dyad that continues to name her as someone whose presence organizes daily life. Albert (2019) argues that this relational naming functions as the novel's minimal counter-structure against anomie, not institutional intervention, but the continued, fragile re-anchoring of meaning within the bond between Ma and Jack.

The novel's closing movement, the physical return visit to the shed, enacts this recovery on the characters' own terms. Jack, in his narration, confronts Room not as trauma but as a space that can now be named and left behind:

> *"Can we go back sometime?" "Not to live." I shake my head. "Just to visit for one minute." Ma leans her mouth on her hand. "I don't think I can." "Yeah, you can." I wait. "Is it dangerous?" "No, but just the idea of it, it makes me feel like..." She doesn't say like what. "I'd hold your hand." Ma stares at me. (Donoghue, 2010, p. 273)*

For Jack, the return transforms what was once his entire world into what it materially is: a small, locked shed in an ordinary backyard. For Ma, it is a confrontation with the literal site of her captivity, a form of reorientation that is not framed in the media's terms, nor as a scandal the family cannot resolve, but as a physical space she can now inhabit only from the outside. Lorenzi (2017) interprets this return as the characters reclaiming the carceral space on their own terms. Jack's farewell to the physical room marks the narrative's transition from enclosure to continuation, not freedom in a triumphant sense, but the beginning of a life that no longer takes Room as its sole frame of reference.

The novel's final argument is that what makes survival possible is not the restoration of social order, whose contradictions remain unresolved, but the durability of the relational structure through which both Ma and Jack have always made sense of the world. Post-escape reintegration, Room ultimately suggests, is not a clean transition from confinement to freedom. It is an ongoing, unfinished negotiation with the layers of social expectation that failed her, and the bond between Ma and Jack remains the smallest yet most durable unit of meaning in a context in which every larger institution has fallen short.

4. Conclusion

This study reveals not only Ma's personal breakdown following her escape but also the deeper social structures that rendered that breakdown inevitable. At its core, Room is not a novel about captivity but a novel about what happens when a survivor returns to a society unable to accept her now-transformed self. The analysis demonstrates that Ma's overlapping identities as a survivor of sexual violence, as a single mother, and as a woman attempting to reintegrate into the outside world do not produce separate, manageable pressures.

These pressures are interwoven. Every institution she encounters after her escape, her grandfather, the clinic, the media, and the family home, responds by demanding that she erase parts of herself in order to be accepted. Through Durkheim's theory of anomic suicide, this study traces how the accumulation of these rejections dismantles the normative framework that ordinarily keeps a person oriented within the social world. The norms imposed on Ma multiply until they contradict one another, and her suicide attempt marks the point at which this

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dissonance becomes unbearable, not a personal act of desperation, but a social fact produced by her position within the social current. Ultimately, Room compels its readers to ask precisely where Ma has been set free.

The answer is uncomfortable: a world of conflicting and irreconcilable expectations offers her less room to exist as herself than the locked shed she left behind. What sustains her is not the restoration of social order, but the bond between her, as a mother, and Jack, as her child, the smallest and most enduring unit of meaning in a context where every larger institution has failed. Future research could extend this framework to other literary narratives centered on women who are survivors of long-term trauma, testing whether the same patterns of anomic withdrawal recur across diverse cultural contexts.

The analytical model developed here could also serve as a foundation for qualitative studies of how actual survivors of confinement describe the normative pressures they encounter during reintegration, thereby bridging literary analysis and social inquiry. Researchers focusing specifically on Room may further explore how the choice of a child narrator, as a formal device, shapes what Ma is permitted to disclose about her own suffering, a limitation that should be read as a sociological statement about whose voice is granted authority within the discourse of trauma.

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