

Centralizing the Peripheral Narrative: Cultural Reception of Deviant Behavioral Paradigms in Jerry Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom*

Dr. Saumya Srivastava
Assistant Professor
Amity University

ORCID: (<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9302-4092>),

Abstract

Em and the Big Hoom presents an account of a person who suffers from a psychological disability. It is noteworthy in the narrative how Em is always discredited, and despite her mental malady, she is forced to perform all the roles of the mother. Em's heteronormative existence is questionable, as she is unable to abide by the roles imposed on her by society. Em makes the labor of women visible, and by doing so, she tries to disrupt the patriarchal glorification of the role of motherhood. Women are usually cast into the roles of nurturer and caregiver. Em also tries to fit into the role of motherhood despite being afflicted by bipolar disorder. Her disability is often pushed toward the margins. This research presents an investigation of the roles imposed on mentally disabled mothers in India.

Keywords: Heteronormativity, Disability, Mad, Manic Depressive, Bipolar Disorder.

Introduction

Jerry Pinto's mother, named Imelda Pinto, suffers from a manic depressive disorder that ranges from extreme euphoria to grave sadness at times, which is often referred to as bipolar disorder. "Disabled women struggle with both the kind of oppressions of being women in male-dominated societies and the oppressions of being disabled in societies dominated by the able-bodied" (Wendell 244). *Em and the Big Hoom* is an account presented by an unnamed narrator, who in all likelihood is Jerry Pinto.

The term heteronormativity was coined to denote that society was predominantly heterocentric, and any deviations from this would result in repercussions. The 'standard' sexual orientation is to be heterosexual, and anything that deviates from this is deemed to be out of the 'normal' context. (John 137)

To adhere to the norms of heteronormativity, it is important to adhere to the roles of behavior pattern, culture, and gender roles. Every individual is supposed to act according to the norms of heteronormativity. Any deviation from the standardized norms will lead to problems on all fronts. "Em's comment reveals her own internalization of the dominant heterosexual norm, wherein motherhood is a natural phenomenon implying that all women are born with the innate qualities and knowledge of being a mother." (John 138) Em tries to shed light on the exploitation and forced responsibility that are levied forcibly on mothers. She also explicates her marginal position as a mad woman. Pinto describes the grave and serious events in a comic manner. Pinto recalls the time when his mother got hospitalized in a psychiatric ward, and from the hospital she used to write letters to her husband, Augustine. She describes the surroundings of the hospital in fragmented language, which makes no sense to the reader but is a reflection of her mood swings. In her letter, she reproaches her husband's postcard, as she thinks that postcards do not give heartwarming experiences. She also talks about a wild sparrow who intends to eat the last bit of her toast. The subtext of these fragmented images speaks volumes about the melancholic fervor pervading the novel.

Disabled people can participate in marginalizing themselves. We can wish for bodies we do not have with frustration, shame, and self-hatred. We can feel trapped in the negative body; it is our internalized oppression to feel this. Every (visibly or invisibly) disabled person I have talked to or read has felt this; some never stop feeding it. In addition, disabled women suffer more than disabled men from the demand that people have "ideal" bodies because, in patriarchal culture, people judge women more by their bodies than they do men. (Wendell 249).

This is because it is believed that men stand for intellect and women symbolize bodies. Imelda Pinto calls her husband Augustine "Angel Ears", because he has typical ears. She also refers to him as 'Mambo' or 'Augie March.' She never calls him by his real name. The narrator wonders whether her insanity has compelled her to observe keenly or decipher strange things about Augustine's ears, or whether this observation is the result of love. Imelda used to call Augustine the 'Limb of Satan', and when Jerry asks her the reason behind it, she simply says that he made her commit innumerable sins. She believes that engaging yourself in carnal pleasures is a sin if the motive is not to procreate. She says that she has aborted her babies twenty-six times. "When we make people "other," we group them together as the objects of our

experience instead of regarding them as fellow subjects of experience with whom we might identify.” (Wendell 251) This othering has been minimized by Pinto’s effort, as the dexterity of expression has made the narrative very relatable.

Material and Method

This paper has presented a qualitative analysis of the societal construct which acts as a hindrance for many to exist. It presents a constructive criticism of the functioning of the society which marginalizes the deviant existence. It also presents an analyses of all the parameters involved in fabricating the stringent structure where identities suffocates.

Result and Discussion

Imelda's emotional responses used to vary, and sometimes she used to exhibit mixed emotional responses. Her proclamation of the gloomy facts with a broad smile gives the true picture of her malady. Imelda says, ““You are a wicked young man to laugh at an old lady's guilt,’ said Em. But she was smiling too.” (Pinto 6) Pinto's mother is always referred to as “Em” by Susan and Jerry. Very rarely, they used to call her Mummy or Ma. Pinto's father is usually referred to as ‘The Big Hoom.’ The probable reason for naming Imelda ‘Em’ is perhaps because ‘M’ stands for mother. Augustine is named ‘the Big Hoom’ because whenever he is asked any question, his answer used to be in the form of a big sound produced while saying “Hoom.” As a young boy, Jerry Pinto is aware of some problems that exist in his family, and the cause is his mother, who gets ill frequently. He understands that it is mandatory to admit her to the hospital. Imelda once tells Jerry about an incident in which, being afraid of the running tap in her house with no drains, she chooses to move out with Susan and Jerry and commit suicide by jumping in front of a bus. She believes that this is a much better way of ending life than drowning yourself in the house. Again, when she is rescued by the bus driver and is taken to the hospital in a taxi, she again imagines the taxi full of blood with no drain. The preoccupation with the idea of being drowned and choked to death is persistent throughout the diegesis. “Each time she had tried to kill herself, she had opened her body and let her blood flow out.” (Pinto 13) In order to take care of Imelda, a nurse is appointed so that she can watch her. Being relaxed that now the nurse will take good care of their mother, Susan and Jerry go out to watch a movie like all the others of their age. Usually they never get any chance to enjoy their lives as they have always been bogged down by the responsibility of their mother, who suffers from psychological infirmity. After having a good laugh and merriment at the theater, when they return home, to their astonishment, they find the nurse sleeping and their mother drenched in blood in the bathroom. Jerry seems to be in utter shock. Blood stains everywhere, and the broom filled with blood is not a memory that would go away easily; rather, it becomes part of your latent memories and keeps coming back to you in the form of flashes. The family suffers the most because they are stigmatized and excluded, and apart from that, they have to deal with the disease on a daily basis. Jerry, while listening to her mother’s story of running tap in the hospital, reflects on how the Big Hoom must have dealt with Imelda's disease in the past thirty years. “I have said that for the able-bodied, the disabled often symbolize failure to control the body and the failure of science and medicine to protect us all.” (Wendell 251)

In one instance, in the narrative, in chapter two, we find the description of the first meeting of Imelda and The Big Hoom. Jerry Pinto reads his mother's diary to narrate the incidents that happened before he was born. He uses Em's diary in order to draw a clear picture of his mother's mental health. He wants to know about the various events responsible for defining her psyche. Through her diary, Jerry Pinto learns about Em's encounter with Gertrude and Mr. Augustine. Gertrude, one of the employees at ASL (Ampersand Smith Limited), and Em, a newly appointed stenotypist, meet each other in the office for the first time. Being completely innocent, Em seems to be clueless about the advances made by Mr. Augustine, who was the junior manager back then. Gertrude used to tell her about the nuances of romantic affairs. When Em fell ill, Gertrude used to visit her. Jerry really likes talking to Gertrude because she used to give glimpses of the whole Em, of which Jerry is hardly aware. By whole Em, Pinto means the normal Em with no malady. Gertrude used to throw some light on the world, which is normal. Em's family has always seen the normal world from the outside, as they have never been accepted in the normal world because of their ailing mother.

As such, disability has four aspects: first, it is a system for interpreting and disciplining bodily variations; second, it is a relationship between bodies and their environments; third, it is a set of practices that produce both the able-bodied and the disabled; and fourth, it is a way of describing the inherent instability of the embodied self. (Thomson 259–260)

All the four aspects listed by Thomson play a significant role in describing what constitutes “disability.”

The inherent instability of consciousness in Em is starkly visible in the narrative. The conversation with Em used to be exhaustive because, while talking about her life incidents, she used to go astray and digress from the current topic. In order to extract the factual incidents of her life, it becomes necessary to remind Em of the original topic or incident that she earlier intended to narrate. While narrating her past stories, she frequently used to exhibit a nervous breakdown. Her panic attacks become starkly evident when she is asked to teach mathematics. It also surfaced while learning shorthand, which is completely new to her. She finds shorthand difficult and mathematics tedious to handle. These incidents are the accounts of the initial era of her malady. She would cry at every small incident, like when she was frequently greeted by her students. This exhibits her emotional turmoil. “The disability system excludes the kinds of bodily forms, functions, impairments, changes, or ambiguities that call into question our cultural fantasy of the body as a neutral, compliant instrument of some transcendent will.” (Thomson 260) Em has a painful past. She has migrated from Rangoon to India because of various attacks by the Japanese on Burma. She used to narrate all the incidents of her life in parts. She fails to present a holistic picture because of her mental infirmity. The images she presents are fragmented, and this may be the result of repressing her painful past. Being exiled from her country adds to the misery. This eventually takes the form of an intellectual disability. Jerry often says that it is impossible to reach the mental state or psyche of Em.

Moreover, disability is a broad term within which cluster ideological categories as varied as sick, deformed, abnormal, crazy, ugly, old, feeble-minded, maimed, afflicted, mad, or debilitated—all of which disadvantage people by devaluing bodies that do not conform to cultural standards. Thus, the disability system functions to preserve and validate such privileged designations as beautiful, healthy, normal, fit, competent, and intelligent—all of which provide cultural capital to those who can claim such status and who can reside within these subject positions. (Thomson 260)

The careful description of the transformation of a person into the subject position is visible in the narrative. In chapter three, Em talks about her initial meetings with The Big Hoom and also throws light on her past ambition to become a writer, but due to her family condition, she is forced to take up a job. Throughout the diegesis, Em reproaches her mother. In one instance, she proclaims that mothers sometimes devour the lives of their own infants. She is fond of her father. At another instance in the novel, she starts chanting, “Mother most horrible, mother most terrible, mother standing at the door, mouth full of dribble.” (Pinto 51). She openly talks about sex with her children and considers it her moral responsibility to educate them so that they can choose for themselves. Jerry often professes that the only thing he fears is Em's depression, as she becomes the most wild-like animal in that particular state. Em is quite anxious about herself and her emotions. She confesses the fact that she is socially inept, with no friends or home to take refuge in. She further says that she is clumsy with no control over her body, and her mind is in peril because of the incongruous or damaged genes. Imelda is fearful of ten thousand things, like the idea of being in the dark; the death of her father; her own death; the image of rejoicing over the death of her mother; and even the possibility of going insane. These manic reactions or overthinking on these issues speak a lot about bipolar disorder, which seems to be slowly engulfing her life. Em's continuous moan because of body aches tortures not only her but the entire family. Even her mind fails to define the reason for the bodily pain that she witnesses continuously. The traumatic experience of a person afflicted with an intellectual disability finds its expression in the following lines, where Pinto says, “My mother lives through the long black night of the mind. She longs for death. She asks us if we can give it to her.” (Pinto 60) When the pain becomes unbearable, sometimes she asks others to kill her so that she is relieved from that pain. Em never hesitates before revealing her mental illness, but Jerry is a bit hesitant. Jerry longs to have a perfectly normal family, for which he once proclaimed that he is ready to offer prayers in front of any god. He wants to turn his mother into a completely normal person. Pinto attempts to define depression from the point of view of the agony faced by his mother. He says, “Depression means nothing more than the blues, commercially packaged angst, a hole in the ground; until you find its black weight settling inside your mother's chest, disrupting her breathing, leaching her days and yours, of color, and the nights of rest.” (Pinto 70) There were times when Jerry's friends used to mock him by imitating Em. He used to cry his eyes out. The Big Hoom used to explain to him that his mother was suffering from a chronic disease like diabetes. He keeps wondering about how The Big Hoom has been dealing with this situation for so long. Is he not affected by people's perceptions? The Big Hoom once said that he will always love Em because she loved him when she was perfectly alright. Em, throughout the narrative, describes the recollections of her thoughts in a blatant manner. In many instances, Em used to be clueless about things. Money has never been a priority for her. Despite earning money for her family before marriage, she never used to keep anything for herself. She used to give all the money to her mother. It never occurred to her that she should keep money for herself as well.

Pinto further in the narrative puts forth an incident where he visits an institution of mentally ill people. He recalls how they are constantly directed to do various chores. They are exposed to electroconvulsive therapy, which is

dehumanizing as it fails to treat the patients. Electroconvulsive therapy rather turns human beings into mere slaves with no authority to speak. Their language is considered more of a rant. Pinto observes intellectually disabled people and feels a strange kind of fear. He sees people with no hair walking in a queue. They do not have any identity of their own, as their families have abandoned them and taken away all of their money and property. They do not have any sense of belongingness because whatever belonged to them has been taken away from them forcibly. In India, nobody thinks of treating intellectually disabled people because perhaps the idea of treating intellectual illness is considered a waste of time. The result, if it comes, comes late, and sometimes it never comes at all. Therefore, Pinto proclaims that in India, these people are referred to as "mad" and not mentally ill. "Disability is also sometimes experienced as a transformation, or a violation, of self, creating classification dilemmas, ambiguous status, or questioning assumptions about wholeness." (Thomson 114) When Em has been exposed to electroconvulsive therapy, she forgets everything she likes, like the sweets of Brijwasi. She is not even aware of what Brijwasi is. She fails to recall her memory.

Pinto professes that in his childhood, he was told that his mother was suffering from a nervous problem. Later, he is told that she has had a nervous breakdown. There has been a period of time when she has been considered schizophrenic. People used to call her manic depressive, but she could identify herself with just one word, which is 'mad.' Later in the story, we witness that Jerry Pinto becomes a little worrisome when he gets to know that manic depressive disorder can be passed down to the offspring. "Because disability life narratives can counter the often moralizing, objectifying, pathologizing, and marginalizing representations of disability in contemporary culture, they offer an important, if not unique, avenue for inquiry into one of the fundamental aspects of human diversity." (Couser 401)

Conclusion

Pathologizing, objectifying, marginalizing and moralizing aspects of a disabled identity are visible in *Em and the Big Boom*. Pinto, at one instance in the narrative, proclaims that we do not know what it is to be normal. We have never been treated as normal. Susan and Jerry are both referred to as the children of a mad woman. They are never allowed to go to any other place. Em becomes the center of everything for them. It becomes their moral obligation to take care of her and to be with her all the time. During the time of examination, the responsibility lies with The Big Hoom. "Depoliticized and aestheticized by the authoritative critical frame of the grotesque, the disabled body is perpetually read as a sign for a degenerate soul or a bankrupt universe." (Thomson 112) Towards the end of the narrative, Em dies of a heart attack. The fabric of social structure becomes clear. People who never used to visit them started visiting them. They started socializing with them. Those who never used to come to see Em, even when she used to get seriously ill, came to visit her after her death. To Jerry's amazement, he is struck with a strange kind of feeling. He wanted to cry, but he does not seem to be sure of the reason behind his grief. The narrative ends with Pinto having mixed feelings about her mother's demise. It seems like a new beginning for them to lead a normal life, but at the same time, it is also the life they have never been exposed to. Em has always been the center of their lives. "Encouraging everyone to acknowledge, accommodate, and identify with a wide range of physical conditions is ultimately the road to self-acceptance as well as the road to liberating those who are disabled now." (Wendell 245) The narrative gives a glimpse of the ideological construction of people with a disabled person in the family. Pinto describes and acknowledges the various challenges that the family of a disabled person faces. Apart from the day-to-day challenges, the entire family is usually ostracized by society. This prohibits them from leading a normal life.

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Competing Interest Declaration

The author(s) has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this manuscript.