

# Society and Mental Illness: A Psychoanalytic Exploration into the Memory of a Bipolar Woman

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the representation of mental disorder in the discourse of mental health within Indian society through the analysis of Jerry Pinto's novel *Em and the Big Hoom*. The novel captures the experience of living with a family member who suffers from a mental disorder, through the eyes of caregivers. The novel also portrays the present-day mental health care condition in India. Pinto describes language as the only medium to highlight the struggle of people suffering from mental disorders. The puns and jokes and the colloquial terms used by Em in this novel are examined to emphasize the interrelation between mental illness and society. Jokes and puns disclose the unconscious of the human mind and decode the repressed thoughts and desires that are there censored by society. Delusions and memories of Em are also investigated. The theory of Psychoanalysis is applied for this purpose. Utterings of a '*pagli*' (mad) that is immediately discarded by society get attention from her caregivers. Research about literature on mental illness could contribute to bringing real changes in society and laws related to mental health care and eradicate the stigma associated with mental disorders.

## Keywords

Mental illness, Memory, Fiction, Society, Psychoanalysis.

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Mental disorders could be observed among people across the world and represent broad-ranging categories of illness that include mild anxiety as well as severe disorders like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder that are related to the thought processes and moods of a person that crucially and adversely affect the behavioural patterns of an individual. Bipolar disorder is a mental illness that has the symptoms of extreme mood swings that include both hypomania which is a state of excessive energy that may affect health negatively and also manic depression to such an extent that a person may attempt suicide. Mental disorders are caused by genetic factors or chemical imbalances in the brain. But some physical or emotional abuse or a traumatic event or social deviance could also trigger the development of mental illness. Treatment procedures of this include psychotherapy, medications, hospital and residential treatment programs. Although today psychiatry has transformed from the dark corners of asylum to the light of living within the community. But, in India, people still believe that mental illness is related to black magic and ghosts, which often leads to ignorance of the medical condition. Fictions that realistically portray the different aspects of mental illness could be used as a tool to reduce the stigma associated with this and end discrimination against persons suffering from mental disorders. Understanding the mechanisms of the mind of mentally ill patients would help people to break stereotypes associated with mental illness.

Literature is the best mode for describing the indescribable sufferings of people having a mental illness. Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom* describes the struggle of a mentally ill protagonist along with her caregivers and portray the entire mental health care system of India. This paper analyses the representation of mental disorders in the narrative, focusing on the linguistic choices in the text by unveiling the implicit revelations hidden in language. Freud's theories are extremely important in the interpretation of language to reflect the latent revelations in speech. Freud describes how the memories of childhood and adolescence could be forgotten and returned in adulthood (Freud, *Screen Memories* 334). Language is an important aspect in the analysis of mental illness. The personal letters of Em, and her conversation with her son reflect the fragmented past which hints at the role of society - the institutions of family, religion, marriage and medicine, which is somewhere related to her mental breakdown. Puns, jokes, colloquial words and delusions of Em will be analysed to reveal the unconscious of the patient that discovers the hidden issues of identity problems, societal oppression and their relation to the mental illness in the light of the Theory of Psychoanalysis.

In the context of Indian writing in English, *Em and the Big Hoom* is a rare novel that describes mental illness as its central theme. In terms of the portrayal of symptoms and

treatment procedures of mental disorders, this novel is a welcome exception. Not only the psychopathology of bipolar disorder but the entire mental health care system of India of the early 90's has been captured through the caregiver's lens. As the psychiatrist of Father Muller Medical College, Smitha Lamiya Rasquinha has stated, "To the casual reader, it is a good story, which sensitizes one to and hopes de-stigmatize mental illness... to those dealing with mental illness, it reminds us of our limitations and the paramount importance of empathizing with the family and addressing all their insecurities" (91). Jerry Pinto, the Sahitya Akademi Award winner novelist was born in 1966. He was a Roman Catholic of Goan origin who grew up in Mahim Mumbai which is also the setting of *Em and the Big Hoom*. But when Pinto was asked in an interview whether his story is his first-hand experience with mental illness. He states that "Yes, this is my story. But it is a story I tell about what happened to me. And so I say that my book is 95 percent facts and 95 percent fiction" ( Penguin Random House 7 ). Pinto succeeded in creating public awareness about the taboo issue of mental illness and the need of empathizing with the patients and their family members. Mentally ill people in India were considered criminals even some years ago as the Mental Health Care Act of 1987 allowed "coercive admission of people into asylums and psychiatric rehabilitation centers" ( *Mental Health Care Act 1987*). But restriction of Indian Penal Code Section 309 and the latest development in mental health and psychosocial development law in India leads to the passing of the Mental Health Care Act 2017 which changed the previous nonhuman status of persons with mental illness. This law also banned all applications of medical procedures without the permission of the patient and his/her family members and also decriminalized suicide.

Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom* captures life in Mumbai, India, from the perspective of a young boy living with his bipolar mother. The novel reflects the literary landscape and the present-day scenario of the mental health condition of India which is not explored in this paper. This paper mainly focuses on how Pinto describes language as the only medium to explore the dark and untrodden area of mental illness. The novel depicts the daily life of a middle-class family with the fear and eagerness of the narrator to search for the cause of his mother's illness - the origin of it. The personal accounts of Em written in her diary, letters of Em, and conversation between Em and the narrator (Em's unnamed son) incorporate to involve the readers in the same inquisition as the narrator, search for the source of Em's mental illness.

The title *Em and the Big Hoom* refers to the narrator's mother Imelda (Em) and his father Augustine as the Big Hoom for the loud sound he makes every time whenever he has been asked a question. The title indicates the happy life of a middle-class family with a caring father, mother, son and daughter (Susan). But the title ironizes the story of the ordinary family with Em, the severely mentally ill patient who has attempted suicide three times. Em's exchange with her husband or her children is shocking as she openly speaks about sex and body. From her conversation with her family, she expresses the voices in her head and past experiences of her life, matters that get relegitimized by her writing of a diary. Em's chats include jokes and puns about her past that reveals her unconscious. A pun is the humorous use of a word that indicates a double meaning which is shared between the author and the reader. According to Freud, all human beings are pleasure-seeking – we are controlled by both the reality principle and the pleasure principle, the pleasure principle guides us to gratify our sexual desires. He states that libido is "the energy of those instincts which have to do with all that may be comprised under the word love", libido is much wider than the sexual urge – the total striving of the individual (Freud, *Group Psychology* 211). Libido is present in all human beings. To

obtain civilization, primitive impulses of human beings must be channelized into other occupations by the reality principle, the repression of sexual desires diverts the energy to other activities which are more socially acceptable – “We believe that civilization has been built up under the pressure of the struggle for existence, by sacrifices in the gratification of the primitive impulses and that it is to a great extent forever being recreated, as each individual successfully joining the community repeats the sacrifice of his instinctive pleasure for the common good” (Freud, *Civilizations and its Discontents* 50). But these repressed desires are not accessible from the conscious mind and can be accessed through an unconscious state in the form of dreams. Freud further points out that the existence of the unconscious can rise the consciousness through slips of tongue or pen, known as Freudian slips. Analysis of puns, jokes, and colloquial terms in speech and writing demonstrate the presence of mental disorders through language. As Freud states, the pun is “the lowest form of a verbal joke” (Freud, *The Purpose of Jokes* 46) and he further elaborates how suppressed desires can enter the consciousness by leaving the unconscious through speech.

In the novel, *Em and the Big Hoom*, reminiscing about her adolescence, Em’s pun on the word ‘Roman Catholics’ as ‘Wholly Roaming Cat Licks’, as her family was a Goan Catholic, reflects her repressed disgust for the strict authority of the church to control the bodies of women as abortion was not allowed among the Roman Catholics in the 1950s – “It’s always a sin according to the Wholly Roaming Cat Licks” (Pinto 112). Freud explains that the unconscious could be expressed through puns and jokes in language – “Jokes, like dreams and slips of the tongue, bear the traces of repressed desires” (Freud, *The Purpose of Jokes* 232) – which hints at the conflict between social values and instinctive urges. Em’s critique of the church points toward the repression of the institution of society on women who dictates women how to conduct their bodies – “We confess to men who’ve never had to worry about a family” (Pinto 134). Linguistic humor rebels against the demands of society – sexual thoughts are forbidden in society especially when it is concerned with women – “Humour is not resigned, it is rebellious” (Freud, *On Art and Literature* 338). This repression of society somewhere gives birth to Em’s abhorrence of becoming a mother which is represented by her using of the word ‘*mudh-dha*’, a colloquial term used for ‘mother’ –

I saw what children do. They turn a good respectable woman into a *mudd-dha*. I didn’t want to be a *mudh-dha*. I didn’t want to be turned inside out. I didn’t want to have my world shifted so that I was no longer the centre of it. This is what you have to be careful about, Lao-Tsu. It never happens to men. They just sow the seed and hand out the cigars when you’ve pushed out a football through your vadge. For the next hundred years of your life, you’re stuck with being someone whose definition isn’t even herself. You’re now someone’s *mudh-dha* (Pinto 134).

In this speech Em exposes the position of women in the family and the workings of the institution of motherhood as she stresses her struggles of becoming a mother – “how completely the personal identities of women are subsumed into the supposedly greater category of motherhood” (Matthew 138). Moreover, women are always expected to suffer the pain related to natural birth, that glorifies the patriarchal definition of motherhood. So even if there are medicines available in the market to lessen the pain of childbirth, the Catholics considered it would diminish the glamour of motherhood –

They gave her sedatives? Oh no, they didn’t, the dirty bitches. I remember a priest coming in on Sunday and reading out of the Genesis. It had to do with

Adam and Eve and their apple. Apparently, we were supposed to suffer. Birth was supposed to be painful and we were suffering in expiation of Eve's sin. Adam got away, of course. Men do (Pinto 84).

But Em went against the strict norms of religion and she used contraception to avoid her pregnancies, which created a sense of guilt within her that is represented through the myth of 'twenty-six transplanted fetuses' which she told to her psychiatrist Dr. Michael (Pinto 107). As an adolescent, Em was terrified at the thought of becoming pregnant and she heard about a method to remove her imaginary pregnancies by jumping on steps down the stairs, six times six, each of twenty-six times and eating papaya seeds. These actions, later in her life, generated guilt within her which leads her to mention this 'old fashioned' incident many times before her children and her psychiatrist. As Winnicott says,

It is common to find people who are burdened by a sense of guilt and indeed hampered by it. They carry it round like the load on the back of Christian in Pilgrim's Progress...We are dealing here with abnormalities of the superego...We can study these excesses of guilt feeling in individuals who pass for normal, and who indeed may be among the most valuable members of society. It is easier, however to think in terms of illness, and the two illnesses that must be considered are melancholia and obsessional neurosis...Melancholia is an organized form of the depressed mood to which almost all people are liable. A melancholic patient may be paralysed by a sense of guilt, and may sit for years accusing himself or herself of causing the world war (*Psychoanalysis and the Sense of Guilt* 20).

In her manic phase, Em, lost in her deepest depression, used to utter about her different abortion techniques just like the melancholic patients which reveals her guilt. It could be counted as a hidden guilt of Em which somewhere has some link to her mental illness. Religion and its strict norms for women push them to the brink of mental disorders.

Em had the desire to pursue her career in English literature in a degree college – "She dreamt of lectures and Milton and prosody" - but her financial crisis enforced her to seek a job as a typist (Pinto 13). She had to repress the desire for higher education in her unconscious mind. Furthermore, Em was a good writer in her early life and wanted to continue her career in writing which is also evident in her letter and diary writings after her mental breakdown as observed by her son:

Em wrote. She wrote when she was with us. She wrote when no one was around. She wrote postcards, she wrote letters in books, she wrote in other people's diaries, in telephonic diaries, on the menus of takeaway places...Did she want to be a writer? ...why didn't we see her as a writer?...How could we have seen it when Em had not seen it herself? And even if she had wanted to turn to writing in those years, would her condition have allowed her the space and concentration to do so? (Pinto 24).

But, Em's every desire was repressed under the 'chays and jays' of shorthand and typing (Pinto 26). All these unfulfilled desires stem from guilt and taboos imposed by society. But these desires could be satisfied through an involuntary thought process. This is known as wish fulfillment which takes place in dreams and delusions of psychosis. In *Em and the Big Hoom*, among many delusions of Em, one is her belief that she would be raped. In one incident, describing her hallucinations Em states to her son about the voices that came from the fans and dictated her to follow their orders during her manic period –

“The fan had been sending messages for a while. Often, these were innocuous messages that had very little impact on the family...but this time, the message was clear. Take your son and leave the house”(Pinto 79). Em followed the command of the fan and left her house with her son. As Em wondered on the road, she was followed by a boy and she has thoughts in her mind about that boy – “Black Pants wants to have sex with her”(Pinto 81). After wandering sometimes on the streets Em finally tried to attempt suicide by coming in front of a bus. But she was saved by the bus conductor. Delusions are false beliefs that a person holds as true. Freud states that “psychosis is an expression of the failure of the ego in reconciling the death drive and the demands of civilization...In the case of psychosis, the conflict between the death drive and the demands of civilization appears in the form of an impasse between the ego and the external world” (Freud, *Complete Work of Sigmund Freud* 230). His theories consider that psychosis is the loss of reality – “Both neurosis and psychosis are thus the expressions of a rebellion on the part of the id against the external world, of its unwillingness, or, if one prefers, its incapacity, to adapt itself to the exigencies of reality (Freud, *Complete Work of Sigmund Freud* 229 ). So, the matter of psychic procedures of repression and rejection discloses the shape in which psychosis positions themselves against the dominance of the operations of the drives: the ego, aids the driving vital, and withdraws itself from a fragment of reality. The psychic procedures outcome in a second stage of the loss of reality. The loss is elucidated by the construction of a delusion as a process of substitution of the rejected reality. This dominance explains the status of loss of reality: in psychosis, the loss of reality resides in the inflation of the imperative of the drives, which is manifested in its delusional logic of attempting to repair the rejected reality. In Em’s case her curiosity about sex and body in her adolescence was subjugated under the threat of religion which formed the delusion – “ ...I knew how scared I was of the whole sex thing, We had been told it was the gateway to hell, that we would lose everything if we went all the way. We were told men were dangerous”(Pinto 79). Here, it could be observed how delusions reflect the repressed unconscious.

As discussed earlier, before her marriage Em had to sacrifice her desire of higher education and became a typist with torn heart. But after that even her identity of an independent woman was also snatched from her when she had to leave her job and become the mother of two children which created an abnormal repression and identity crisis – “Mae said it was the right thing for me to do...so she decided that I would become a secretary...I was so unhappy I wept almost all the time”(Pinto 17). Describing her illness, Em states to her son,

After you were born, someone turned on a tap. At first it was only a drip, a black drip, and I felt it as sadness. I had felt sad before...who hasn’t? I knew what it was like. But I didn’t know that it would come like that, for no reason. I lived with it for weeks (Pinto 7).

This experience of Em hints at the complexities and difficulties related to motherhood which is considered the phase of the beginning of her severe mental disorder. However, society immediately discards this feeling of women as females are regarded as natural/innate/inborn mothers. To discuss further the aspect of motherhood and its relation to mental disorder, Em’s accounts of her personal history as diary writing reflect the loss which is evident in her childhood when she had to come to India, The metaphor of pianos that were thrown from boats when the Catholics migrated to India represents the loss of music from Em’s life - the deprivation of the migrants as well as their

language problems, cultural gaps, difficulties in adjusting to the new environment which adversely affects the mental health of the migrants.

Em had suffered migration, displacement and the loss of a home when she was still a girl. After arriving in India, she and her mother had spent some tough months in Calcutta before shifting to Bombay. There they had awaited the arrival of the man of the house, who was still walking from Burma to India through jungles and swamps, surviving malaria and tigers.

They had spent those anxious, long months living in a storefront room with no toilet – to use one, they had to walk to relative's house once a day. And when she grew up Em had to give up her studies and work to support the family. She'd been doing it for over a dozen years (Pinto 65).

The mourning for the loss of home with the loss of language, culture and tradition becomes complicated. This loss retriggers older losses and primary ones from the origination of life, namely the "primary love object"(Freud, *Theory of Sexuality* 190). The migrant finds himself in a retrogressive situation with narcissistic damage that is related to the loss of identity. This reiterates unconsciously the trauma of the child's dependent on the mother for nourishment and shelter. Em has suffered all this in addition to "the guilt of leaving others behind activates the terror of traumatic internal object loss" (Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia* 245). According to J.Bleger, as he states in *Psychoanalyse du cadre psychoanalytique*, "culture contains and holds the psyche. Together with losing his culture of origin or mother tongue both had a containing and protecting function. When abandoning his language and culture of origin to learn the language of exile and integrate a new culture the migrant often feels that he is abandoning his parental figures" which further instigates trauma –

She had had far too many languages drummed into her ears – first Konkani in Goa, then Burmese in Rangoon, then Bengali in wartime Calcutta, and now English, in which her child spoke and dreamed. It had taken away most of her vocabulary. She communicated with gestures, facial expressions and the assumption that everyone knew what she was talking about (Pinto 13).

The personal history of Em blurs with the social scenario of India concerning mental health. Before the decriminalization of suicide in the Mental Health Care Act of 2017, the persons who attempt suicide but survived it were considered criminals. In *Em and the Big Hoom* also Pinto describes how the Big Hoom had to bribe the police to avoid any charges against Em for her suicide attempt. According the Indian Penal Code 309, attempting suicide was considered a criminal activity. The picture of psychiatric care system of India is reflected in this novel. In one instance, the narrator and Susan, in the absence of their father, admitted Em in Staywell clinic in one of her manic episode. When Em returned the children realized Em was administered with Electro Convulsive Therapy (ECT) there without the consent of the family members. According to the recent laws of Mental Health Care Act of 2017, such applications of ECT treatment is strictly prohibited. Now ECT treatments could be administered if the patient does not respond to any other forms of treatments and with the consent of the patient and the family members after discussing with them about the benefits and the drawbacks of such treatment procedures. Reflecting the mental health condition of India Pinto increases awareness among people. Blurring the lines between fiction and fact the novel opened up a space for discussion about mental health condition in India. Pinto was asked once in an interview that if he feels guilty because of using his mother's illness as the theme of his

novel. He states that “ one is not bound to writing only what one is ethically entitled to , because if imagination is restricted thus, then empathy must be dead” ( Anasuya 5).

Investigation of the puns, jokes, colloquial words used in the novel hints at the operations of coercive forces of society that includes family, community and religion and their relation to mental illness. Although heredity plays an important role in mental disorder but in Em’s case, her parents were absolutely mentally stable. Childhood trauma of migration, pressure of the family, poverty, innumerable sacrifices, religious tortures and sexual repression during adolescence are the different causes that could be related to Em’s mental illness. Em’s caregivers, her husband, her son and daughter, Susan, tried to understand her mind through language, long conversations with ‘endless cups of chai and beedis’ and normalize mental illness just like any other physical illness – “If your mother had diabetes, what would she say?”(Pinto 50). The novel is reminiscent in its representation of different mind as it portrays subverting all the stereotypes.



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