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Family Life and Mental Illness in Jerry Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom*

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ABSTRACT :

Jerry Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom* (2012) is a significant contemporary Indian novel that examines the intimate relationship between family life and mental illness. Set primarily within a small middle-class Catholic household in Mahim, Mumbai, the novel narrates the experiences of a family living with *Em*, Imelda Mendes, a mother affected by severe mental illness and recurrent suicidal behaviour. Through the unnamed son's fragmented memories, Pinto explores not only the psychological suffering of the individual but also the emotional, social, and practical consequences of mental illness for the entire family. This paper examines illness-narrative perspectives and demonstrates that Pinto presents family not as a perfect or harmonious institution but as a continuously negotiated space in which love and suffering coexist. Ultimately, the novel humanizes mental illness and proposes storytelling itself as an act of care and remembrance.

Keywords: Jerry Pinto, *Em and the Big Hoom*, mental illness, bipolar disorder, family, caregiving, stigma, motherhood, memory, Indian literature

Introduction

Mental illness has increasingly become an important subject in contemporary literature because literary narratives can represent psychological suffering in ways that clinical descriptions often cannot. While medical discourse generally classifies mental illness through symptoms, diagnoses, and treatments, literature can explore the subjective and relational dimensions of illness. It can ask what it means to live with mental illness, to love a person who is mentally ill, and to construct an ordinary family life around recurring psychological crises. Jerry Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom* is particularly important in this context because it locates mental illness within the everyday environment of an Indian family.

The significance of the novel lies in its refusal to present mental illness as an isolated individual problem. *Em*'s illness affects everyone around her. *The Big Hoom* must constantly negotiate between being a husband, father, protector, and caregiver. Susan and the narrator experience fear, embarrassment, guilt, anger, helplessness, and premature responsibility. The family must repeatedly reorganise itself whenever *Em* enters a crisis. Consequently, mental illness becomes a family experience rather than merely an individual diagnosis.

This research paper therefore studies *Em and the Big Hoom* primarily through the relationship between family life and mental illness. It argues that Pinto's novel does two important things. First, it humanizes the mentally ill person by presenting *Em* as more than her diagnosis. Second, it reveals the emotional and practical burden placed upon family caregivers.

Mental Illness as a Family Experience

One of Pinto's most important achievements is his representation of mental illness as a condition that transforms the entire family system. *Em* is the person who experiences the illness, but the consequences extend to everyone around her.

The Mendes household is structured around uncertainty. There is no permanent guarantee that an ordinary day will remain ordinary. *Em*'s moods can shift suddenly, and her family members learn to read her behaviour carefully. They become attentive to small changes in her speech, mood, and actions. This creates a condition of emotional vigilance.

The family therefore develops its own methods of survival. Everyday routines coexist with psychiatric crises. Meals, conversations, jokes, arguments, hospital visits, and memories exist alongside suicidal behaviour and emotional breakdowns. The result is a family environment in which extraordinary suffering becomes part of ordinary life.

This is one reason the novel avoids conventional melodrama. Pinto does not isolate moments of mental illness from the rest of family existence. Instead, illness appears within domestic life. The family continues to eat, talk, quarrel, love, remember, and laugh even when *Em* is suffering.

The novel thus questions the assumption that mental illness creates a complete separation between the "normal" and the "abnormal." *Em* is not permanently defined by crisis. She has moments of affection, humour, intelligence, sexuality, anger, tenderness, and creativity. Her illness is part of her life, but it is not the whole of her identity.

The Big Hoom: Husband as Caregiver

Augustine, or *the Big Hoom*, represents the largely invisible world of family caregiving. His role is especially significant because he is simultaneously husband and caregiver. He does not “cure” *Em*. He cannot permanently eliminate her suffering. His role is instead one of continuous presence.

The Big Hoom provides stability within an unstable environment. When *Em* becomes unpredictable, he becomes the figure who attempts to maintain continuity. His caregiving is not presented as heroic in a conventional sense. He performs ordinary tasks repeatedly, patiently, and often without recognition.

His relationship with *Em* also complicates the idea of romantic love. Marriage in the novel is not simply a relationship between two emotionally healthy individuals. It becomes a long-term negotiation with illness.

The Big Hoom's relationship with *Em* suggests that love does not necessarily mean the ability to solve another person's suffering. Sometimes love means remaining present when there is no solution.

This makes caregiving one of the novel's central ethical themes. *Das and Samanta (2026)* describe the Mendes household as a small “caregiving economy,” emphasizing that care is distributed among family members rather than confined to medical institutions. *The Big Hoom's* caregiving also reveals the limits of private care. The family must repeatedly confront medical institutions, doctors, hospitals, treatments, and the social attitudes surrounding mental illness. Thus, the family becomes an unofficial mental-health institution.

Children and the Loss of Childhood

The narrator and Susan experience perhaps the most complex consequences of *Em's* illness. Children ordinarily depend upon parents for emotional security. In the Mendes household, however, the children must sometimes become protectors of their mother.

The children are not simply witnesses to *Em's* illness. They become part of the structure through which the illness is managed. Their emotional development is therefore shaped by their mother's condition.

The novel demonstrates that mental illness can affect family members who do not themselves have the diagnosis. Their suffering may be invisible because society tends to identify the patient as the only person who requires attention.

Stigma, Shame, and Silence

Mental illness in the novel is also a social problem. The family does not exist in isolation. It exists within a community that may not understand or accept *Em's* condition. Stigma creates pressure to hide mental illness. Families may fear being judged, ridiculed, excluded, or misunderstood. Consequently, silence becomes a survival mechanism.

The Mendes family develops private ways of talking about *Em's* condition. The use of humour is particularly important. By making jokes about painful circumstances, the family gains a temporary sense of control over experiences that otherwise appear uncontrollable.

Basu (2023) identifies language as a significant medium through which Pinto represents mental illness and examines the importance of jokes, puns, and colloquial expressions in the novel.

Conclusion

Jerry Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom* is a powerful exploration of the intersection between mental illness and family life. By placing a mentally ill mother at the centre of an ordinary Indian household, Pinto transforms what might have been a medical story into a deeply human narrative about love, fear, responsibility, memory, and survival.

The novel's greatest achievement is its refusal to isolate *Em* from the rest of her identity. She is mentally ill, but she is also a mother, wife, woman, lover, storyteller, and individual. Her illness changes her relationships, but it does not erase her humanity.

At the same time, Pinto demonstrates that mental illness affects more than the diagnosed individual. *The Big Hoom* becomes a caregiver whose love is expressed through endurance and presence. Susan and the narrator experience the loss of a secure childhood as they learn to monitor and protect their mother. Their lives become organized around the unpredictability of her illness.

The family consequently becomes the central site of mental-health experience. The novel also exposes the social dimensions of mental illness. Stigma, shame, silence, and inadequate institutional support intensify the suffering of the Mendes family. Mental illness becomes difficult not only because of its symptoms but because of the meanings imposed upon it by society.

Pinto's narrative strategy is particularly important. The fragmented structure, shifting memories, conversational style, and mixture of humour and pain create a narrative form appropriate to the instability of the subject. The story cannot be told as a simple chronological account because the narrator's relationship with his mother is itself fragmented by memory and trauma.

Most importantly, *Em and the Big Hoom* transforms storytelling into an act of care. By reconstructing *Em* through memories, the narrator resists the reduction of his mother to the label of “madness.” The novel preserves the ordinary details of her existence and thereby restores her individuality.

In this respect, *Em and the Big Hoom* is not simply a novel about mental illness. It is a novel about how people continue to love one another when illness makes love difficult; how families survive uncertainty; and how memory can preserve the humanity of someone whom society might otherwise define only by illness.

The Mendes family is neither perfectly healthy nor conventionally dysfunctional. It is simply human. Its members experience love and resentment, fear and humour, dependence and independence, exhaustion and resilience. Pinto's great contribution is to show that mental illness does not remove a family from ordinary life. Rather, it changes the conditions under which ordinary life is lived.

Thus, *Em and the Big Hoom* makes an important contribution to Indian literature on psychological suffering. It encourages a movement away from stigma and toward empathy, away from diagnosis alone and toward lived experience, and away from the isolated patient toward the wider network of

relationships in which illness is experienced. The novel ultimately suggests that care is not the absence of suffering; it is the decision to remain connected in spite of suffering.

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