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Finding Hope in the Fractured Self: A Post-Structuralist Reading of Jerry Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom*

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Abstract

This article seeks to explore Jerry Pinto's Em and the Big Hoom through a post-structuralist lens, whilst analysing the overall narrative and character dynamics. Central to this examination is the discussion of how language and meaning is decentralized through the character of Em; whose expressions and thoughts work as rhizomes that offer novelty of perspective. The paper also seeks to examine the fluidity of identity of the four major characters in the novel. By studying the novel within the larger framework of post-structuralism, with a particular focus on 'becoming', assemblage', and 'rhizomes' by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the paper aims to understand the workings of interconnectedness within the text. The article also seeks to discuss how Em's speech, though seemingly unstable, reveal an implicit wisdom when viewed through a post-structuralist framework. In Pinto's attempt to bring mental health to light through literature, he also brings alive a story that is deeply moving at various levels. The novel speaks about the trauma that Em and her family went through because of Em's mental health; this article seeks to study how in the midst of this darkness, hope shines through – in Pinto's writing, the language of Em and the sheer grit of her family.

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Madness is enough. It is complete, sufficient unto itself. You can only stand outside it, as a woman might stand outside a prison in which her lover is locked up. – Jerry Pinto, *Em and the Big Hoom*

Introduction

Post-structuralism was a movement away from the idea of a fixed meaning. In Jerry Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom*, the narrator's search for meaning becomes one of the overarching themes of the novel. He tries to find meaning in his mother Imelda's (Em's) trauma (and the pain thereby suffered by the narrator, his sister (Susan) and their father Augustine (the Big Hoom). In various parts of the novel, he seeks the meaning of life, the meaning of being the son and caretaker of a mother struggling with mental health, and most of all perhaps, trying to understand what it means to be mentally ill after all.

> I don't know how to describe her depression except to say that it seemed like it was engrossing her. No, even that sounds like she had some choice in the matter. It was another reality from which she had no escape. It took up every inch of her. She had no time for love or hate, fatigue or hunger. She slept ravenously but it was drugged sleep, probably dreamless sleep, sleep that gives back nothing. (Pinto 47)

Aathira A. S. and A. Poongudi write, "The chaos fuming up from the entire illness circumstance allows only an external agent to observe the events with clarity and transmit the effect through the ebb and flow of the narrative" (1651). This takes us back to the quote used in the abstract of this paper, where the narrator reminds us that one can only be an observer to someone's mental illness, always outside it (Pinto 55). The narrator's search for meaning in the midst of chaos that allows him to explore the philosophy of various religions, bringing both hope and light into the novel.

> I believed in him [Jesus Christ] and the Buddha and Krishna and Allah because you can believe in anything if you look straight at the message. Love one another? Good idea. Detach yourself? Good idea. Do your duty? Good idea. Submit to the will of God and go with the flow? Good idea. In a perfect world, you could even play with permutations and combinations of the above. Submit to the will of God because he wants you to love everyone and do your duty. (Pinto 51)

Research Objectives and Theoretical Framework

This article aims to research how Em's fluidity of language, a result of her mental illness, is a space that allows the birth of new wisdom. This paper also

aims to explore how identity, for Em and the other three characters of the novel, is in a constant state of flux. This paper seeks to discuss how the interactions that take place between Em, Susan, the Big Hoom and the narrator, convey a larger sense of hope, in the midst of trauma, chaos and pain.

This article seeks to apply some of the theories of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to study the text through a post-structuralist lens. Understanding the idea of the self through Deleuze and Guattari is to perhaps see the self as an ever-changing identity, one that is constantly in the process of 'becoming.' This 'becoming' then is "unlimited and unending, as it has no true point of origin or destination (the world is always in 'flux")" (Young 41). He writes how becoming represents the paradox of infinite identity, which simultaneously incorporates multiple meanings and directions thereby embodying both the future and the past, ideas of abundance and scarcity, the interplay of cause and effect, and being active and passive (ibid). Of interest to this paper also, is another the concept of the Body without Organs. Though a very complex idea, it describes a subject that is "a site of forces rather than stability, always changing rather than static, a series of desires rather than a constant identity" (Nayar 83).

Through the application of this theoretical framework, and a critical reading of Pinto's novel through the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari, this paper seeks to highlight how a post-structuralist reading can give a different layer of meaning to an existing text, and hopes to make a small contribution to the already existing discussion on post-structuralism.

Literature Review

Parinita Malhotra's "The Maddening Womb: Unwanted Motherhood and Intergenerational Trauma in Jerry Pinto's *Em and The Big Hoom"* focusses on Em's encounter with motherhood set against the expectations of a traditional Indian mother. Her paper reads Em's manic episodes as the result of a masculine symbolic order, one that required her to give up her individuality, her profession, and in some sense, her sense of self (35). In Aathira A.S. and A. Poongodi's *Echoes of Chaos in Jerry Pinto's Em and the Big Hoom* (2022), the novel is read as a chaos narrative, or an illness narrative (1650-1658). Sreya Mariam Salim's *Em and the Big Hoom, a story of love and madness* (2023) describes the breakaway from traditional gender roles that is seen in the novel (65). Paul David and Alan G in their paper *Problematizing the postmodern condition in Em and the Big Hoom* (2022) study the role of intertextuality and non-linearity in the novel. As Sinha and Ali observe, the fractured self in *Em and the Big Hoom* emerges through the interplay of language and emotional neglect, where identity is continually negotiated within unstable familial and psychological spaces (10). These papers form a fertile ground to start an academic discussion on Em and the Big Hoom, highlighting the various themes within the text; as well as the various ways in which the text can be read.

Discussion: Em and the rhizomatic structure of her thoughts

Pramod Nayar, in his discussion of Deleuze and Guattari, elaborates that a rhizome is a botanical term where grass grows randomly, with no identifiable beginning and end, blurring boundaries of individuality; this becomes a site where every 'self' is a "multiplicity of desires and social forces" (Nayar 85). In his explanation, he includes the definition given by Deleuze and Guattari which states that at "any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything… a rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up on one of its old lines, or on new lines" (ibid). Such a rhizomatic structure is characteristic of Em's thoughts and conversations in the novel. Early in the novel, when Susan is about to embark on her first date, Em's conversation moves from giving friendly advice, to singing "Mother most horrible, mother most terrible, mother standing at the door, mouth full of dribble" (Pinto 39), to talking about the role of lies in conversations, about her sexual desires (or the lack of them), her first date with Augustine. The author writes, "the trail was lost and the story had ended. For a while" (43). In another episode in the novel, Em asks Susan, "am I a standing red pen?" (54), to which Susan replies that she isn't, and Em is relieved. On another day, Em asks Susan to stand behind her as soon as she enters, so that "they' don't get her"(53), Susan changes the conversation to having tea, but the topic comes up later when Em believes that 'they' may have poisoned the tea. This rhizomatic structure is also evident in Em's notebook, where entries end abruptly, and are sometimes continued later.

Em and the Body without Organs

"Mad people are telepathic, clairvoyant and everything that should frighten you. Be afraid of me,' she had once joked" (Pinto 74). Graves writes:

> The body without organs is essentially a figure of becoming. Nothing is static; everything is in flux, and the only 'being' is becoming. The Body without Organs enshrines this anti-essentialist ontology in one vivid image: a body that refuses to submit to the imposed order of organs, and in doing so, remains fluid and alive with possibilities. (Graves).

Schizoanalysis asks, "what is your body without organs," thereby inviting individuals to move beyond the roles, identities and narratives attached onto them by society. It views schizophrenia as a metaphorical framework (and more than that) to dismantle rigid mental orders. The detachment of desires from their usual objects and their surprising intermingling is of interest to Deleuze and Guattari, especially when the "sense of a unified self, melts into a flux of sensations"(ibid). We see this often reflected in the life of Em, through her moments of up and down. Schizoanalysis maintains that in the extremes of manic moments lie inspiration, and "a revolutionary potential to escape the mental confines of tradition"(ibid). It is in these moments that Em's sharp and (sometimes) violent use of language addresses topics that may not usually be spoken about openly with one's growing children, which include sex, abortion,

and the disdain for the label of being a *mud-dh-dah* (Pinto 39). To say that Em's disease allowed her, or forced her to break free of the shackles of tradition may be to simplify the complexity of her pain and trauma. Yet, within Em, there was a supressed rebel of the times – one who may have never been married if not forced, may have not chosen motherhood, and may have continued to remain a teacher.

"Living with Em, having survived her into adolescence, we'd earned the right to be her equals" (Pinto 39). In another incident, a prospective National Defence Academy candidate meets Em at the hospital. Em does not shy away from talking to this stranger about her condition, or about how she tried to kill herself. Em breaks free from the shame attached to having a mental condition. We see episodes of her realizing the pain she is in, and wishing for death; yet, we never see shame in Em. Em escapes traditions in many ways, but mostly by being her bold self, unapologetically. Was this a choice she exercised, or a result of her condition, one is left to wonder. The shame, pain and trauma is imposed upon her family – who must not only survive her violent outbursts, yet somehow find the courage to be empathetic to her.

"You are mental, aunty?'

I bristled but my mother didn't seem to mind.

'Yes, yes.'

'Oh good. My Buaji says God listens to the prayers of mentals because they are touched by His hand." (Pinto 49)

Em and her wisdom

"Even now, I look in Em's notebooks not for my mother but for Augustine's Beloved" (Pinto 17). Em defies patriarchy in her own way when she decides that "I surrender all" is not an apt hymn for a woman to sing (95). But later announces that she would not believe in the philosophy of "let thy will be done" but rather choose whom she would worship – and chooses a woman's kindness by praying to Mother Mary (136). Em speaks her mind when she celebrates that due to her surgery, she will no longer be able to menstruate, "Who wants hot flushes? Who wants emotional instability?"(155). In the part of the novel where Em narrates to Susan how she cried a lot when she was about to get married, she reminds us that you can be completely in love with someone, and yet mourn the loss that this change of identity will bring – a loss of childhood, and a loss of innocence (92). Em empowers her daughter when she openly discusses sex, love and kissing; perhaps thereby leading Susan on the path of becoming more of herself, and embracing her sexuality.

Em says to Susan, "Do what your heart tells you. It doesn't matter if you make a mistake. The only things we regret are the things we did not do" (Pinto 38). Throughout the novel, we witness how the characters are constantly pushing their boundaries to become something they may have not chosen.

Young adolescents become primary caretakers of their mother struggling with a mental illness; Em's husband Augustine must work both overtime and in the kitchen. Even Em transforms from 'Buttercup' to 'Mud-dh-dah', from a young reluctant teacher to a woman who battles a disease that consumes her up completely. The characters have moments where they lose meaning in their life, and struggle to make sense of their new roles as Em's caretakers. Through these incidents, we find how this personal narrative is interconnected to all the institutions around us – religion, cinema, family and political ideology.

Conclusion

Em and the Big Hoom deals with a lot of subjects such as Electric Convulsive Therapy, the tag of being 'Mad', getting mocked for being the children of a mentally ill woman, the loss of childhood, the love between Augustine and Imelda that transforms into selfless caregiving, migration and displacement, hospitals and healthcare system, attempts to kill oneself, the intense pain felt by Em due to her condition, and also felt by the narrator, Susan and Augustine as her family members, what shines through is the resilience of a family: a family that accepted and loved Em, a family that never abandoned her, a family that faced multiple fears and let go of many ordinary joys to be able to keep their loved one alive. *The Em and the Big Hoom* resonated with many people who take care of family members affected by mental illness. It gave way to *A Book of Light*, where multiple people shared their stories of being caretakers of family members struggling with mental health disorders.

When Kenneth Graves summarizes his understanding of the Body without Organs, he writes, "the Body Without Organs is the constant provocation of freedom within us – that part of life which will not be pinned down by habits, identities, or codes, forcing desire to reinvent itself again and again" (Graves). In some sense, Imelda embodies this very concept. She personifies the idea of not being pinned down, and forces herself to live – reinventing herself after each manic episode, and after each attempt to kill herself. Em's condition pushes her beyond her own boundaries – both physically and mentally. Her faith in Mary, her casual conversations with other people in the hospital, and her sharp comments about her own truth, though harsh, bring to life a fluid state of existence. She flows with her emotions and thoughts, and her family become the outsiders to her states – sometimes as steady as land, sometimes erupting like a volcano, but always flowing like a river. "On days like this – no, at moments like this – it was quite possible to forget all the tags – mad, manic depressive, bipolar – and frolic with her through van Goghian fields of free association" (Pinto 75).

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