

Reinvigorating Memories, Cultural Attitudes and the Practice of Mothering : A Reading of Jerry Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom* through the Gender Lens.

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ABSTRACT

Representations have the power to influence cultures and shape our imaginations accordingly. Over the years, representations pertaining to the domain of motherhood in India, have made us believe in the self – negating, sacrificing and giving nature of mothers. Experiential aspects of being a mother have been neglected for long and it has now become crucial to address those concerns along with the gendered expectations embroiled within the practice of mothering.

This research article makes an attempt to analyze how the recognition of the experiential aspects of being a mother is important along with the multidimensional understanding of the practice of mothering and disability. The present study highlights the need for construction of empathetic spaces to facilitate the growth and nurturance aspect of mothers.

Keywords - Mothering, Gender, Disability, Empathetic spaces.

The biological aspect of giving birth to a child by a woman, is made so synonymous with the overall ethics of care and the necessary investments required of them in the proper growth process of a child, that the difference between the two is hardly reflected upon. Moreover, association of sacrificing, self – negating and guilt inducing aspects with the practice of mothering, do not leave much scope for understanding that this practice has eventually become highly gendered. Researchers associated with the maternal feminist scholarship across the globe, have realized how cautiously this paradigm needs to be dealt with, as both the “enabling” aspects of being a mother and the “constraining” aspects are embedded within the same relationship (qtd. in *Interrogating Motherhood* xii). In the words of Jasodhara Bagchi - “placing motherhood under the gender lens may look like a harsh rejection of elements of human nature that are dear to

women ... hence one needs to exercise one's empathy and imagination to the full in order to understand the complex gendering process involved in motherhood" (xxi).

Within this scenario, the role played by representations and their contributions in the popular cultural imagination hold significance. It is crucial here to note that representations not just depict how our societies work instead it also incorporate elements that are transformative, holding up the mirror to the society or simply visionary. Specifically, within the context of motherhood in India, varied kinds of representations have successfully made an impact on the larger cultural imagination of people and thereby, have been fulfilling the political and socio-cultural needs of those particular periods.

While most of the popular representations centred on mothers have in a way solidified the patriarchal constructions and the self – negating aspects of mothering in India, there have been some representations that have challenged the gendered expectations. This research article makes an attempt to analyze how being a mother is not the sole identity that any woman needs to strictly hold onto rather empathetic spaces need to be recognized in order to facilitate the simultaneous growth of mothers.

The study has been carried out in reference to Jerry Pinto's novel, *Em and the big Hoom* (2012) in an attempt to foreground how mothering is not simply a gendered process just involving women to naturally take care of those dependent on them because they gave birth to them. This practice takes a more complex turn when mothering is done by a person with disability. A close examination of this text highlights the multidimensional aspects of the practice of mothering, disability, and the role of memories. The present study is carried out from the perspective of motherhood studies, feminist theory and disability studies.

When the paradigm of motherhood is viewed from the gender lens, it can be better understood how shifting solely the responsibility of taking care of a child on mothers is unjust while simultaneously, guilt inducing, physically and mentally taxing, and eventually, denying them the basic equal opportunities that other stakeholders have in our societies. Pinto's text calls attention though most of the times quite humorously to the lived experiences of a mother, who not only has a distinct identity of

her own and quiet unpopular opinions about being a mother, in addition, she is dealing with the condition of Bipolar Affective Disorder.

Till today, motherhood and disability are the two terms that are usually not understood in relation to each other. This juxtaposition is appropriately captured in words by scholars like - Anu Aneja and Shubhangi Vaidya in the following manner – “when the mother in question is a disabled woman, the discourse of motherhood gets even more complicated motherhood denotes care giving, while disability suggests a person in need of care herself, and thus, being unfit to assume the caring role for another...” (156 -157). Pinto in this novel, mainly through the relationship developed between the unnamed son/narrator and his mother - Imelda, provides a glimpse into the world where attempts are everyday made to cross this bridge between mothering and disability.

Primarily, *Em and the big Hoom* is a novel centred on the Mendes household where disruption, chaos, unnaturalness rules partly due to Imelda’s medical condition and partly due to her atypical opinions on various subjects. Still, there is no dearth of affection, caring and understanding amongst all the family members. This novel is an odd mixture of letters, short scenes, recollections, anecdotes, and diaries of different people, all put together for readers to understand the complexities of lived experiences of a mother and the efforts made by her family members to support her existence.

Memories and the reconfiguration of them throughout the text, helps in continuously reconstructing the identity of Imelda or as she is fondly referred within the narrative as Em. For the world outside, Em is just another mad woman, whose views, thoughts and opinions are not much of relevance. Whereas, in contrast, the unnamed narrator/son makes it a point to prove the otherwise. From the beginning of the novel, the unnamed narrator gives readers a sense about his mother’s unique personality. As he explains - “she was always Em to us. There may have been a time when we called her something ordinary like Mummy, or Ma, but I don’t remember ... she was Em, and most of the time she was Em with an exclamation mark” (Pinto 6-7).

When the novel begins, Em is introduced as sharing her opinions on the issue of abortion and how she would support her daughter

if she needed to ever have one. Talking from the experiential point of view, she reinstates the hardships that women have to go through alone within such situations and how people like Mother Teresa might never be able to understand the prejudices of the society against such women. Em argues that consideration of abortion as sin is very easy while the economic, physical and social aspects involved in raising a child is what requires lots of efforts.

Em's views on being a "muddha" (mother) as she likes to call it are simply in contrast with the idealized pure love notions popularized about mother – child relationships specifically in reference to the Indian cultural domain (Pinto 51). During one of the conversations with her son, Em reflects on the fact how she could never be the perfect mother almost like the ones presented in the *Readers Digest* and then refers to his son as her "messed up child, my messed up child" (Pinto 28).

At various points in the novel Em justifies her stance as to why she feels so differently about being a mother and most of all, the narrative successfully makes it point to project how this difference is not questionable rather the cultural attitude towards these experiential realities, surely needs to be revised. Addressing the complete dependency of a child only on its mother for sustenance, Em notes how – "Marriage is all right. At least the person you're having a go is an adult. But motherhood ... You're given something dependent, totally in love with you and it doesn't seem to come with a manual" (Pinto 52).

It is essential here to note that Em is not projected as a person, who is completely devoid of any emotions towards her kids or her family as a whole. In one of the most sensitive episodes in the novel, Em during a conversation with her son reveals how her two children are her "dividends" but simultaneously remarks – "but what an investment. My life" (Pinto 134). Pinto cautiously make readers aware of the fact that how a woman's world completely changes after giving birth to a child and how even her individuality is also denied. As Em notes - "for the hundred years of your life, you're stuck with being someone whose definition isn't even herself. You're now someone's *muddha!*" (Pinto 133).

Another point that requires attention here is that these thought processes are brought to light within the narrative due to the

constant efforts made by Em's son. While on the one hand, the world denies Em's existence like other mad people discussed within the narrative, her son considers her as a writer "who would like her stories shaped well" (Pinto 44). It is through his faith in Em's stories and affection for her, that he is ready to play the role of "inquisitor, the interrogator, demanding verification, corroboration, further proof..." in order to support her mother's distinct identity (Pinto 27). This communication process is not based primarily on the inputs provided by Em, in addition to her fragments of stories, the son uses his powers of imagination and tries to reinvigorate those memories and thus, give them a new life of their own.

Quite similarly, stereotypical cultural attitudes towards mad people are questioned and thereby, different perceptions regarding normalcy, identities and the need for empathetic spaces are brought into light by this narrative. Specifically through the chapter eleven - "Electro – Convulsive Throppy", where narrator's college trip to Thane Mental Hospital is described in detail (Pinto 194). Here reflections are made on the dehumanization of the mentally ill people in India. As he notes - "it occurred to me that the mad in India are not the mentally ill, they are simply mad. They have no other identity" (Pinto 196). Further narrator's conversations with the medical staff members and the patients of that hospital reveals the apathy of the normalization regime and the constant need to cure or fix the people with mental disabilities in any way possible.

Irrespective of how the medical staff treats the patients at the hospital or the how the world treats Em, the nurturance and care that Em's family provides to her stands in contrast to all those inhuman methods. The acceptance, nurturance and in its own unique way, the dynamic practice of mothering that is followed by Mendes family, shows how there is a need to move away from the normalization regimes practiced within our societies. Though at some moments it is projected how children have to sacrifice a lot of their time in taking care of their mother, still how that turns into bonding and a space for interactions, negotiations, discussions and venting out feelings that are usually suppressed within the Indian households is indeed reinvigorating.

Not simply adhering to the mentally ill perceptions of the society, an empathetic environment is created within the house where different sources are brought to enable different point of views.

For instance, in chapter eight, Em's son finds her letter marked as 'contract' written for her husband Augustine. The content of the letter explains Em's inhibitions about sex, modesty and need for understanding a woman's rights. As she feels that it is her right to decide whether she wants to share her body with someone or not. Though Augustine's response is also incorporated within the narrative, still, what attracts more attention is how Em's son respond to this episode. His interpretation of this episode sheds a different light on Em's character. As he encourages readers to understand Em's past life in the 1980's and how difficult it was for a woman to enter the "dangerous period" of getting married (Pinto 157). He admires Em's efforts in these words - "Imelda must have been prey to greater fears and shame in her youth. It is a small miracle that she wrote Augustine the kind of letter she did" (Pinto 157).

These kinds of meaningful interventions into various important phases of Em's life like getting the first job, marriage, having kids and the sudden takeover by the madness after the birth of her son, depicts the narrator/son's involvement in enabling and constantly rebuilding his mother's identity. This narrative also takes fruitfully into account the responsibilities of being a father and thus, reflects on the paradigm of fatherhood. The narrator admires and sometimes, even wonders how his father can have so much control over the things in their lives specifically when almost everything in their home is on the verge of breakdown.

Quite like the readers, the narrator also questions - "had Em been the able parent, would things have been different?" (Pinto 82). In my view, more than the significance of this question, what matters is how every member acts as an enabling unit for the other. In narrator's words, his life is unimaginable without his father. As he notes - "The Big Hoom was my rock and refuge. He knew what to do, how to handle stuff. He knew when to let us off and when to take things over" (Pinto 80). Such episodes through out the narrative depicts true cooperation and a bond that is formed away from the worldly expectations.

Pinto's depiction of Mendeses can be considered as one of those few representations that puts up a resistance to the idea of an abled mother engaged continuously in the self-negating process so as to be able to serve the ideals of a normal family. Rather a different rhythm of life can be observed through such a portrayal where a mad mother becomes a source of independence and

consideration for her kids, a father becomes a pillar of patience and acceptance for the entire family and children while nurturing their mother, understand the importance of differences.

Towards the end of the narrative when Em dies, contrary to everyone's expectations there is no feeling of respite among the family members instead there is an underlying sense of disruption of the rhythm that they have created over the years. In conclusion, it can be observed that this narrative is not about the lack rather invested in the creation of new possibilities. Such possibilities of nurturance take into account the differences and is premised on continuous construction of enabling spaces for each other. Specifically, in regard to Em, who is never fixated as a dotting mother or a mad woman by her family while simultaneously being recognized for her creativity, unconventional views and as a vibrant storyteller.

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