
JERRY PINTO'S EM AND THE BIG HOOM: A FEMINIST STUDY

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Abstract: Jerry Pinto, born 1966 is a Mumbai based writer whose major works have a feminist orientation which includes the book on actress Helen Jaiarg Richardson *The Life and Times of an H-Bomb*. *Em and the Big Hoom* is his first novel published in the year 2012. He has been a recipient of Hindu Literary Prize in 2012, Crossword book award for Fiction in 2013, Windham-Campbell Prize for Fiction from Yale university and the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2016.

The novel *Em and the Big Hoom* revolves around the female protagonist Imelda (also called as Em) and her bipolar mental disorder. The narrator tries to trace Imelda's disorder on how it began, so that he could find a way to save her. This paper focuses on how the novel projects strong feminist voice in the character of Em and how Big Hoom (her husband) balances these voices with progressive thinking and not entangling Em according to the society. Language plays a very important part in this novel as narrator uses a feminine language because of Em being her mother and a strong feminist voice. Virginia Woolf believed that the best artists were always a combination of the man and the women "Man-womanly" or "Woman-manly". Em's voice echo's through the novel and author uses her mental condition to tell the story in fragments. Em feminist voice is very effective even with her mental disorder. It elevates her personality to talk freely and express a strong female narrative. It is a novel about a middle-class woman who was independent and supported her parents. She got diagnosed by bipolar disorder after marriage and giving birth to her son it affected her life thereafter. The novel is set out from 1950's to 1980's. It portrays a brilliant picture of changing landscape of Indian women, about them going to work and trying to find voice in the society and stand equal to men.

Keywords: Feminism, Man-Womanly, Mental Disorder, Equality, Feminine Language.

Feminist Theory:

An Introduction: Feminism is a movement that works to change ideologies of the patriarchal society that have long existed and re-establish women as the equal to men. It ranges from political movements and equality, economic stability, freedom struggle, social awareness and tries to get equal rights for women in all aspects. Its major concerns are not just equality for women in comparison to men but also linguistics, elaboration of terms like feminine, female and Feminist. Dictionary.com defines Feminism as "the doctrine advocating social and political and other rights of women equal to those of men".

A greater need emerged in 1960's to put a literary theory on feminism so as to analyze all kinds of literary works from the antiquity till the present. This was also the period of major developments in theories all around the world like Jacques Derrida(deconstruction), Jacques Lacan (psychoanalysis and post structuralism), Claude Levi-Strauss(post-structuralism). Analyzing novels and other literary works through a Feminist theory deals with the understanding of the suppression of women and their role in society in their time and how it evolved gradually. According to Toril Moi "Feminist criticism', is then a specific kind of Political discourse: a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism". (Feminist Reader,117)

Elaine Showalter in her book *towards the Feminist Poetics* sketches out the journey of feminist thought in following manner: Feminine (1840-80) in which is in relation to the imitation of male artists and trying to match up to their work, Feminist (1880-1920) included women writing and the protest to male dominance and demanding equal rights for women which included civil rights and Female (1920-) phase had women centric writing and discovery about themselves and their experiences.

Feminism Has Also Been Majorly Categorized Into Four Distinct Waves, Given Below:

First wave of feminism (1792-1920): The term was coined by Martha Lear in 1968. The Feminist movement is believed to be hailed because of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication to the rights of women* (1792) which spoke about the notions of women as the weaker sex, their lack of education, stereotyping of women as sentimental and their secondary position in society. She proposed that gender roles are social and not biological or natural and we see a shift of femininity from natural to social. Margaret Fuller another contemporary in the US in *Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) is seen as an activist parallel to Wollstonecraft's concept of feminism. Fuller's developed her ideas further and spoke about unequal power relations and their being no feminine and masculine roles and that everyone had some traits of the other. She worked extensively towards improving the condition of women prisoners in the country. Virginia Woolf, one of 20th century authors became one of the central figures of critical appreciation and feminist interpretation in late 1960's. She is popularly known for her works like *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *Three Guineas* (1938), *Orlando* (1928) and her famous essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929) exploring gender identity and relations. She tried to break the monotony of patriarchal point of view from which the women read. In her novel *Orlando* she explores the switching of mind in the same body. She believed that everyone whether it be man or a woman had qualities both in each other: 'Man-womanly' or 'Woman-manly'

Second wave of feminism (1960s-1980s): In this era, arose a discussion of a literary theory on Feminism and hence Feminist theory was born. The authors and the critics started going back to the history to reinterpret famous literary works to search for feminist voice. Novelists like Jane Austen, the Bronte sisters, George Elliot and many other started re-surfacing and were being analyzed. Plays like *Rover* (1677) by Aphra Ben and *The Way of the World* (1700) by William Congreve found new fresh perspectives of study. It all began with Simone De Beauvoir's *Second Sex* (1949) translated into English in 1984. With *Second Sex* Beauvoir talked about how men mystified and stereotyped women and that women in turn accepted this and hence were responsible for their own oppression. Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1971) and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1971) targeted Freud and his work on Female sexuality. Phallogentrism was analyzed in the works of D. H. Lawrence and Norman Mailer. Works like Tillie Olsen's *Silences* (1978) and Adrienne Rich's *Of Women Born* (1976) analyzed women's creative production and their urgent need in mothering. Chodorow's book *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) was groundbreaking and it opened up discussions on gender roles and how daughters recognize themselves with mothers but sons separate themselves from their maternal creation.

Third wave of feminism (1980's- 2012): Third wave was a part and parcel of the postmodern thought. The view of gender in this era started taking a new shape. Critics argued that that men and women were social categories. Judith Butler argued that gender was performance enacted by individuals and hence not a fixed category. Gender was related to signifier and its role and hence that if gender role such as women's identity was repeatedly exercised, it becomes a woman. Gender according to postmodernists was an unstable category and had to be repeatedly reinvented. It would depend on location and hence was not universal and would require repeated performance in that gender category to establish one's social role as man or woman. Spivak is also a major contemporary of feminist thought in this era.

Fourth wave of Feminism (2012-present): This is a view or resurgence of Feminism with the use of social media. It is a byproduct of increase in social networking sites such as YouTube, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, etc. It discusses violence against women, sexual harassment, sexual assault in domestic and work places and motives people to come out and speak for their issues and motivate other women to

stand up. There have been lots of movements around the world to speak up for the atrocities against women shaming of the rape culture. The fourth wave sees participation of lots of men in the society who stand together with women. There have been lots of movements like the “Nirbhaya movement” in India in 2012, “#Metoo movement” all around the world speaking about the prevalence of sexual assault in workplaces, infamous “Harvey Weinstein Scandal”, Free the Nipple on body shaming, “One Billion Rising” and many other movements.

Em and the Big Hoom:

An Overview: The novel *Em and the Big Hoom* is a story about the protagonist Em (Imelda) and it revolves around her mental health condition and is narrated by her son. The novel is split up into 13 chapters stretching up to 236 pages and includes very few characters. The novel also provides us with migration period from Rangoon, Burma in 1942 when Japanese attack happened and they all had to flee through Assam on a ship and reach Calcutta. The novel describes their life in Bombay (now Mumbai). It is the journey of the narrator to find out the cause of his mother’s illness and how “the tap turned on” and reconcile with the situation of his family. It is also sets forth the narrative of a family in Bombay who have to live with a mother who is suffering from bipolar disorder. The novel discusses about Em’s depression, her highs, manic state and how much the narrator and his sister Susan had to suffer because of her mental disorder. Another important character in the novel is Augustine (aka Hoom). He is very important to the core of the novel. His presence in the novel is very limited yet it is very effective. He holds the chain of family and keeps their life maintained.

With a mind of an inquisitive journalist the narrator starts putting bits and pieces of Em’s life from Em’s story, her old letters, Hoom’s narrative and Em’s mother’s narrative. The novel begins on this note with Imelda narrating her story to the narrator on how and when he was born, the tap of illness turned on. The novel’s action is limited to Ward 33 of Sir J. J. hospital and their house in Mahim, Bombay. The story moves back and forth in narrative reflecting the characteristics of a postmodern novel and in turn painting the picture of Em’s life slowly and in fragments. After the migration Imelda and her family settled in Bombay and there, she completed her studies and became a steno typist due to economic problems. We then venture into Em’s husband Augustine’s (known as Hoom) childhood who ran away from his house in goa after board exams and returned from Bombay after 3 years with an engineering degree. Imelda met Augustine while working form ASL (Amerpsand Smith Limited). Em’s feminist attitude and free mind attracts Augustine towards her. She openly confesses her opinion about marriage and sex and how it was only meant for procreation. After the intervention of Em’s mother and her aunt they both get married at the age of thirty. Both complement each other very well in their life and they have two kids Susan and the narrator himself. As the novel progresses, we realize the incapably of Em in day to day life and Hoom’s role as a dutiful husband. The novel also describes the suffering of both the kids and how their life was only confined to the house and school and they barely had friends because they always had to take care of their mother. We get to see the narrator trying to study and become a journalist. His sister Susan is a very calm and peace-loving person and most of the time she takes care of her mother. But the bond between the narrator and Em is very strong and hence when she dies in the end, the narrator is seen to be more affected by it and is not able to accept it. The novel ends with acceptance of someone who was big part of their lives and that she had passed away.

Em and the Big Hoom:

A Feminist Perspective: The novel could be placed in the second wave of Feminism because of the story related to us is of that time although it is written in 2012 and there can be arguments of putting the noel into the third wave of Feminism because the novelist’s approach towards feminine subject may differ in thought but still the action in the novel doesn’t give us much proof that we should put in under the different category. The postmodern elements, the stream of consciousness feminine language are all part of the second wave of feminism. It portrays traits of for discussion of sexuality, family, office, reproductive rights and equality in gender.

One of the main contexts is of feminine language which is very evident in the novel. Critics had thoroughly interpreted texts for male centric language and avoiding the female sexuality or rather not being open about it but Jerry Pinto breaks those barriers and in spite of being a male writer produces a work which is not just female centric but the language for the most part of the novel is feminine. Use of words like “Oedipal-shmeedipal”, “cock and the cunt business”, “Holy roaming cat licks”, “wood lamp nymph”, “menstruation”, “cutting themselves to bleed”, “vadge”, “PMS (premenstrual syndrome)” are many such examples of the feminine language which was not patriarchal in nature. It cannot be attributed in her mental disorder as such. Em believed in her independence and her choice of words, her aunt Berta is also seen to be defiant in language and prefers to speak her own formative language with only two nouns “thissing and “this-thing” and then to Konkani. Berta and Em’s mother also speak Portuguese before turning to English.

Scarlet Thomas in the Guardian observes “This book is most successful when the characters are allowed to speak for themselves, and Pinto is quite genius with dialogue”. There are several instances of Feminist voice in Em that clearly cuts through the novel. Her madness does allow her to speak more freely which she could not before marriage. The structure of her speech is diluted because of her mental illness and hence some facts can be overexaggerated but the narrator rechecks these facts by confirming the timeline with the family narrative. Em is a strong independent woman who worked and provides for her family before marriage.

We confess to men who’ve never had to worry about a family. Naturally, it’s a huge sin to them, this abortion business. What do they know? They probably think it’s fun and games. Let them try it.

I could not go to the bathroom. I never did learn how to take a pee in a sari. I mean, the sari and the ghaghra and the pleats and the panties and the seat. It’s just too much of a mess.

These lines deeply reflect on how narrow minded and conservative the society was and even is. Abortion is still seen as a sin because the system is built on patriarchal assumption and hence women’s perspective has never been an important choice. As we move forward, we see Em elaborating on the intricate problems that women face in their daily lives and that how society did not care much about women’s comfort. Movie Pad man (2018) is one such excellent example. It is also education which is very important in these cases and since most of the schools in India do not have sex education which is a very conservative approach, it is important to talk about these things at home.

“So you are saying I should sleep with him? If you love him and if you want to “These are the lines in which Susan and Em have conversation about sex life and how important it is to choose a partner. These kinds of discussions were very rare in an Indian society but it is very important to have an open mind and not create taboo around sex. These lines on the subtext talk about sex education and how important it is for kids to know that.

The term gynographic writing is very important in this context below which was proposed by Maggie Humm in 1998, in which body is used as source for female language and metaphor. Feminine signifiers address questions for female sexuality and open the hysteric notions about a female. Even Cixous used blood and menstruation to reflect women’s language. These lines are portrayal of a patriarchal society which believed that men should not only have virgin women their life partner but also get to fulfill their sexual desires whenever they wanted and in turn women had to fake it and, in some cases, cut themselves to fake their virginity or they would be labeled as sluts in the society.

I don’t know. I was prudish, I think. We all were. We thought no one would marry us if weren’t virgins. I remember listening to stories about the women putting lemon juice there

or cutting themselves to bleed and I remember thinking what a lot of fuss. So much easier not to do anything at all so you don't have to fake it.

You didn't let him kiss on the first date or you would be seen as cheap and he wouldn't respect you. If you were on a second date and didn't let him kiss you were tease.

A very brilliant example of western concept and influence that was growing on the Metropolitan society. Em was an educated woman and these stereotypes were the western interpretation of finding a suitable partner which was setup on a patriarchal assumption of how a woman should behave while trying to be bold and finding a partner for herself. This kind of exercise was unheard in India at the time of post-independence would sound hilarious if someone said something like this was happening. It was country in which child marriages and child labor was a normal thing at that time even after its abolition in 1929. The minimum legal age from marriage for girls was made 18 in 1978.

Oh God, no. I saw what children do. They turn a good respectable woman into a muddha. I didn't want to have my world shifted so that so that I was no longer the center 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 a football through your vadge.

These lines speak of the sensitive nature that is required out of men which they do not seem to care. They do not worry about what pregnancy does to a woman. They only care about sowing the seed.

She had beautiful boobs. I think she was a forty but I couldn't be sure. I shouldn't have been looking, do you think? I mean, was it a bit lesbian? I looked but I don't think I wanted to touch.... You know I found your Debonair...Anyway, I looked at the centerfolds and I thought, some nice girls. But I didn't want to nuzzle.

Debonair was a magazine imitated after playboy in the 1970's in India. In an article by Anvar Ali Khan in Scroll.in Vinod Mehta, the editor of Debonair comments that "magazine has sharply polarized readership, the minority in large cities, who brought it for the editorial content, and the majority in smaller towns, who brought it mainly for the nude photographs". The above lines are characterized as female gaze which is the representation of a female viewer on girls rather than the interpretation of the male gaze. Em is not afraid to speak about her inner desires and feelings. She expresses her feelings and even accepts it to be a bit lesbian for her friend Griselda who had amazing boobs.

"I won't do it on the first night, I told him..... I don't think I am much interested in the whole business of copulation. I love you and I enjoy very much our 'necking and petting'". This comment is made regarding the honeymoon to Augustine. Em asserts herself in this dialogue she is having with her kids and that it should not be mandatory to have sex on the first night as the society had made it. Although her comment in not being interested in sex comes from the religious sentiments of Christianity that she had grown up in, in which she believed that sex was a sin and should only be done for reproduction.

"How often will you expect it? Will I be within my rights to refuse?.....Though why I should ask a celibate (unmarried: not in the text) man what a women's rights are, beats even me". This is the exact thing what was happening in the second wave and women were asking questions about their rights, gender position, equality and rejection for the older norms of compliance because he was your husband and as a wife it was her duty to fulfill his expectations.

"Your body is yours to give or not. Should you decide not, I will respect that, although I must warn you that I will work hard to reverse your decision". This is very important dialogue in the novel as it not only speaks about equality but giving due respect to a life partner. Hoom's character is very minimal yet very effective as this dialogue elaborates. He complies to the feminist theory of treating women as equal to

men in every perspective. But he does not want to be submissive to the to the feminist image and it a patriarchal theory and hence he asserts his position in saying that he will work hard to woo her.

We had been told it was a gateway to hell, that we would lose everything If we went all the way. We were told that men were dangerous. Unpredictable. Violent. You could never be sure what would happen if you were alone with them. They could not be relied on if they had had something to drink. A girl had to be ready for anything. Then, as soon as you were all ready to get married, the same people told you: close the door and be his wife.

The above lines are shades of patriarchal theory in which men are the head of the state and hence they make the rules. The above lines are an explanation of what she was taught when she was studying to a nun and that men were conniving and you had to stay away from them but the moment women get married, the rules change and they had to be the housewives and be inside the house. These lines portray the Indian society of the post independent India which would only see women as housewives and a mother figure.

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. The birth was supposed to be painful and we were suffering in expiation of Eve's sin. Adam got away, of course. Men do.

These lines are a biblical reference of course but it also denotes how easy it is for men to give a mythical structure to the pain but on the subtext level it is a cry of a woman for how religious institutions were built on the patriarchal standards keeping women as marginalized and how the pain was atonement for them.

He said it as if he thought I was going to work for the rest of my life. I suppose I will but it gives me the megrims.... My salary is my dowry. And I can't see how there can be anything wrong with that---except that nothing should be anyone's dowry. No one thinks much if one asks the boy what his prospects are. If money is not important on the girl's side then money should not be important on the boy's side either, not in this day and age at least.

This dialogue or the letter seems to be too forward in time. If this is in fact the story of the 1960's then the dowry was a very common practice even if you lived in Bombay. This can be the ultimate feminist situation in which the Protagonist wants to change the system of patriarchy and even abolish the system of dowry. This can also be related to the effect of the political change happening in that time. The first all-India legislative enactment relating to dowry to be put on the statute book was The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 and this legislation came into force from July 1, 1961.

"We were talking about your problem with money.'. 'No, we were talking about *your* problem with *my* money". This dialogues in the novel opens up the patriarchal assumption of a man assuming that he has the right to decide in his family about how his wife spends her money. Very subtly Em makes a sarcastic remark on Augustine who was trying to control how she should spend her assets.

"Susan had explained the patriarchy's claim on the body of women and how men always wanted to control the way women reproduced." This line elaborates on the linear structure of old-fashioned society and how men wanted control reproduction and have as many kids they wanted. It was never a women's choice to choose her will. Feminists contend that ladies are decreased to the womb, nearly just as if their lone capacity is reproduction. Shulamith Firestone in her book *Dialectic of Sex* (1970) maintains that women could only be free if they were looked outside the reproduction business.

"When I was growing up no one ever talked about PMS (premenstrual syndrome) or anything like that so this was not a scientific thing. It was some atavistic throwback to the time when hysteria was believed to be seated in the uterus." Jerry Pinto in conversation with First Post Journalist Ankita Maneck reveals

when asked a question on prejudice towards women who have mental illness, he says: “Look at the word hysteria. The etymology points out to meaning ‘from the womb’. Look at how we talk about PMSing, it’s just a terrible thing. Women have much, much, worse time, seeking psychiatric help as compared to men” Em here tries to point out the problem faced by women who are too conservative in speaking up about their physiological problems because of the notions built up around the society about these issues. She also makes a specific remark about ‘when I was growing up’, which suggests that things were changing now and there were women who were speaking up about these issues.

Em was a powerful force in the house and these lines below justify the claim that the house was not patriarchal in any sense and projected a strong feminist voice. “We had opted for a service that would in no way suggest how unique Em had been or how powerful a force she had been in our lives.”

Conclusion: *Em and the Big Hoom* is novel that not only defines the mental disorder narrative but the author Jerry Pinto is very significant and crisp about the embedded details of feminist perspective in the novel. With use of linguistics in the language of Em, he produces a work which is totally separate in nature of feminist voice and in turn removes patriarchal voices which are a part of social setup. With her mental disorder Em is able to easily separate herself from the normal society and it frees her of the burden to be more conservative. Hence Jerry Pinto embarks on a journey into the voice of a female and also a writer who himself is a male to change a narrative and try to speak in a female voice. If he is successful or not is a question which can never be answered because we are just starting to mold the female voice and any vocal expression changes with time and there is still a lot to be done, to find and search feminist voices which is not consciously or subconsciously marginalized either by their society or their mind.

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