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Navigating Guilt: An Examination of the Phenomenon of Guilt in Jerry Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom*

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Abstract

Guilt is a recurring undercurrent in Jerry Pinto's Em and the Big Hoom. This moving story explores the daily realities of a family which is dealing with mental illness and struggling with the complex and frequently debilitating sensation of guilt. A psychological crisis in a family and the concomitant emotional and mental conundrums eventuate in an insulated existence with parochial concerns as an inevitable outcome of it. The precarious existence that a family is forced to live, engulfed in the quagmire along with the victim and encumbered by the impairing depressive episodes, is the subject of this paper. Drawing on ideas like survivor's guilt, maladaptive guilt, and the inherited emotional burdens within dysfunctional family systems, the intricacies of emotional inheritance and self-blame are examined through Pinto's candid depiction of a family dominated by the mother's bipolar illness and the father's silent fortitude.
Keywords: *Guilt, Mental Illness, Family Systems Theory, Schizophrenia, Bipolar Disorder*

Jerry Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom* is the story of a dysfunctional Bombay family, with Em, the manic- depressive mother at its centre, around which all the other lives revolve. However, it is the narratorial voice laying bare his pain, fears, anxieties, and helplessness that is the focus of this paper. It is intriguing to examine the manifestation of childhood emotional neglect in the persona of the narrator and the intricate interplay of anger, guilt, and duty that it sets off. The novel can be seen as an exercise in casuistries and the narrator's philosophical ruminations on thanatological concerns and ontological reflections. Narrator's relentless quest to delve into the recondite explanations of the workings of mind as a way of alleviating his guilt and making reparations triggers a pertinacious extrapolation of his own future.

The Diathesis-Stress Model serves as the theoretical underpinnings upon which the structure of this paper is erected, influencing the development of the thesis. The paper sets out to enunciate the significance of the diathesis stress model in elucidating how genetics and sociological factors work in tandem to trigger the onset of schizophrenia. Rebecca Booerman in *Encyclopedia of Personality and Individual Differences* states:

> The diathesis-stress model is a concept in psychiatry and psychopathology that offers a theory of how psychological disorders emerge. According to the diathesis-stress model, the emergence of a psychological disorder requires first the existence of a diathesis, or an innate predisposition to that disorder in an individual, and second, stress, or a set of challenging life circumstances that trigger the disorder's development. In this way, the diathesis-stress model explains how psychological disorders might be related to both nature and nurture and how those two components might interact with one another.(Broerman)

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Rather than taking a reductionist approach by attributing the causes solely to family dysfunction and seeing it as an emotional problem or as a purely biological phenomenon controlled by the patient's genetic makeup resulting from the malformation of the limbic forebrain, a biopsychosocial approach is more comprehensive and inclusive.

Since schizophrenia is also psychosocial in nature, it is vital to study the influence of family dynamics, as there is enough evidence of its veracity in much of the psychiatric literature. It has been noted that "When the individual is seen in her/his family context, we can move beyond simplistic cause-and-effect thinking to a more comprehensive understanding of the multiple factors that interact across time to produce problems or symptoms"(Jim Smith).

There has been extensive research in the area of family psychology that persuasively suggests that even if a single person is afflicted with a neurotic disease such as BPD, it tends to disturb the whole ecosystem of the family and alter the dynamics within it. Murray Bowen, in "A Family Concept of Schizophrenia", writes, "When the child's self is devoted to 'being for the mother,' he loses the capacity of 'being for himself" (Bowen). In a research conducted by Laura Hayes et al. on a sample of sixty caregivers, it was observed that "families of people with psychotic illnesses experience higher rates of depression and anxiety, greater social isolation and decreased quality of life compared with the rest of the community" (Hayes, Hawthorne and Farhall,) Jim Smith in his analysis of Bowen's family systems theory explains:

Individual behavior could be better understood in terms of the group—that is, arising from the dynamics of the larger family emotional and relationships systems. After years of observing family interactions, Bowen became aware that individual behavior often seemed determined less by individual choice and more by the individual's relationship context, by the shifting flow of anxiety and emotionality between and among family members. Human emotional forces and behavior are influenced by the interplay among instinctual, biological, genetic, psychological, and sociological factors. (Jim Smith)

Living with a schizophrenic brings with it an array of challenges, such as perpetually dealing with an erratic demeanour, frenzied bouts of anxiety, confused and obsessive patterns of communication, loneliness, lack of mutual regard among family members and episodes of emotional breakdown, accompanied occasionally by violence. Uncertainty becomes a way of life accompanied by recurrent feelings of frustration. W.H. Watson, in *Encyclopedia of Human Behavior* writes:

> According to a family systems perspective, an individual's functioning is determined not so much by intrapsychic factors as by a person's place in the system(s) in which he or she finds himself or herself, subject to the pushes and pulls of the system, including competing emotional demands, role definitions and expectations, boundary and hierarchy issues, coalitions and collusions, loyalty conflicts, family and institutional culture and belief systems, double binds, projective identifications, and systemic anxiety".(Watson)

The paper undertakes an intriguing exploration of the narrator's deep-seated anxieties, who finds his psyche to be entirely and perpetually marred by the survivor's guilt stemming from his subconscious sense of responsibility for his mother's prolonged battle with schizophrenia. His guilt has striking parallels to the survivor's guilt and maladaptive guilt, psychological ramifications of which must not be overlooked. This thought-provoking analysis sheds light on the complex interplay of emotions surrounding the narrator's birth and its perceived connection to his mother's suffering.

The profound impact of this guilt is underscored by the perception that the narrator's existence came at the expense of his mother's well-being, despite the lack of explicit culpability on his part. In the process of motherhood, he survived while Em had to be sacrificed. She had to be obliterated so that this new being could be born to life. Though signs of her neurosis may already have been lying dormant, it was this event that unleashed their power and brought them to surface. He is acutely conscious of this fact. Guilt emanates from an act of transgression and it lingers until restitution is made and amends are attempted for the crime committed. The narrator endeavors to seek ways to ease his conscience and reinstate harmony. Human beings can feel guilty even when the hurt is unintentional or entirely beyond their control. Even the slightest or apparently innocent involvement can illicit enduring feelings of guilt, even when not at fault ,as is made evident by the statement "what she had done to us paled in front of what we had done to her"(Pinto,211). Sometimes, it is impossible to restore harmony, particularly when the initial blame does not lie with us and it is this internal conflict that becomes the focal point of this paper. He refrains from socializing and does not have a romantic relationship largely because of her condition and the subconscious exacerbation of guilt. It can, therefore, be seen as a way of compensation for her lack, seeking to level the playing field.

The narrator experiences feelings of guilt due to unwittingly contributing to Em's "madness". He subconsciously attributes himself as the cause for her harrowing condition, a sentiment emphasized by Em on multiple occasions. It is distressing to witness these moments as he never had an active role in her situation. He didn't choose to be born to a mother who did not truly desire motherhood. Nevertheless, deep down, he believes that there are other influencing factors at play, with his own impact being just one of many:

> but each time Em told me something about her life , I would examine it for signs , for early indications of the 'nervous breakdown'. It was an obsession and might have something to do with my curiosity about her life. (Pinto, 32)

The narrator's inquisitiveness appears to be a quest for understanding the potential causes of the situation, perhaps in the hope of finding a way to absolve himself of the guilt. What if it wasn't his birth that caused the chaos? What if it had always been something else, perhaps something that could be lying concealed in her past? He struggles to explore and unearth reasons for her madness.

This novel then reads like a desperate attempt to seek answers and explore madness's intricacies. Consequently, the narrator himself evolves into a conflicted subject, with readers trying to unravel him while he strives to discover her. More often than not, we find ourselves aligning with the narrator, making sense of Em's expressions, sharing in his distress and bewilderment, empathising with him, attempting to imagine what it must be like to be living with someone afflicted by schizophrenia. Our vantage point mirrors that of the narrator's. Unfortunately, we inhabit different realms and can never truly fathom his anguish. We find ourselves in a similar situation to his when he says, "You would never be able to visit her tower. You would only be able to visit another tower, a quite similar yet independent one. There were no shared towers, no room for more than one person" (Pinto, 75). Everybody seems at a loss for words trying to express their condition; there's always a lack. At one moment in the novel, Em says, "Nobody knows what I am going through. What I suffer only I know" (Pinto, 75). This perhaps is the limitation of language. The lacuna between language and lived experience makes expression incomplete. However, allegorical statements and

metaphors help partially to capture the essence of emotions and experiences. Since the author has chosen to predominantly use the first person in the book, readers can more readily access his ideas and feelings. The novel goes beyond being a mere memoir or a first person account of the victim. It is rather told from a double perspective with a heavy usage of letters, monologues, and dialogic conversations, which effectively captures the immediacy of all those involved in the drama of life. Despite the book being written from a dual perspective, the readers should not be mistaken into thinking that it captures the entire breadth of it. However, this should not discourage us from engaging with the perspectives presented.

The fact that he is just a teenager trying to comprehend his mother's condition necessitates a heightened level of empathy from the readers. "I wasn't sure I would ever be able to deal with the world. It seemed too big and demanding and there wasn't a fixed syllabus either" (Pinto, 9).

Em asserts that her distress did not manifest during her first pregnancy; rather, it was during the second pregnancy that she spiraled into madness implying that the onus for her anguish falls on the narrator "she told me about the tap that opened at my birth and the black drip filling her up and it tore a hole in my heart" (Pinto, 168).

The prospect of being a young adult who's just starting out as a journalist, financially constrained due to his middle-class status, residing in a metropolitan city, with a significant portion of their resources allocated to the treatment is daunting. The likelihood of managing all the physical, emotional and mental labor without the assistance of the father unsettles him as he states "it was the worst possible nightmare we could conceive because we had no idea what we would do if we had to do it all on our own: monitor her pills, decide when she went to hospital, hold on to her life with a daily promise, pay her bills, take her raging or desperate calls, earn a living" (Pinto, 171). It has been studied that meagre financial resources and their impact on caregiving:

> May reflect limited options for alternative forms of care among the poor, the extent to which having a sick relative may deplete financial resources, or both. Whatever the nature of the relationship, however, limited funds are another potential source of stress for those who are providing care. (Cochrane, Goering, Paula and Rogers)

He stresses on the unconventional nature of their family and how it deviates from the traditional model. Rather than the mother assuming the primary care giving role, the two children have taken on the responsibility of caring for their mother. The narrator is an emotional wreck. He laments the fact that Em's condition has compromised their ability to function socially. He articulates a sense of unfamiliarity with the experience of a "normal" family and the absence of knowing what it's like to have guests over. He hates talking to Gertrude, Em's delusional friend, but would talk to her despite everything *"because talking to anyone normal was an invitation to the world of ordinary people who had ordinary woes and worries: money, sex, sins and real estate, for instance"* (Pinto, 23). He desperately seeks a sense of normalcy, by way of having visitors over, or going on night outs just as a normal teenager would do. Once recalling a night stay at his friend's, he says "I did not sleep that night; I never did in anyone else's home. It was too much of a novelty and I wanted to savor every moment of it" (Pinto, 223). Upon Em's passing, the contemplation of how they would carry on with their lives without her and a potential need for a shift in demeanor and conduct weighed heavily on his mind "Visitors were not encouraged. No, we didn't have visitors. Now we could. Did we want them? Did we know what to do with them?" (Pinto, 225).

Not only does he harbor concerns about lacking a normal life but also dreads the possibility of spiraling into a similar condition as Em's, potentially due to genetic predisposition. Considering that schizophrenia can be passed down from parents to children, the very thought of this possibility induces significant anxiety prompting several visits to the doctor in order to alleviate his fears, "I want to know. Will I go mad? …the expert had no answer. Wait. Watch" (Pinto, 214).

He seeks a definitive answer, an elusive prospect in such circumstances, which only serves to compound his anxiety. He visits a doctor for some relief, only to be sucked down into the vortex of fear, grappling with a barrage of unanswered questions and unsatisfying responses:

> I feared most the possibility that I might go mad too. If that happened, my only asset would be taken from me. Growing up I knew I did not have many advantages. I had no social skills. I had no friends. I had no home –no home that was a refuge. I seemed to have no control over my body; my clumsiness was legendary. All I had was my mind and that was at peril from my genes. (Pinto, 58)

Although he tries to pin it to the psychosocial reason, he knows its biology couldn't be ignored. He acknowledges, "it helped us to know that we were doing everything in our power. But it seemed that all psychiatric medicine was aimed only at the symptoms…Underneath, the mysteries continued, unchanged. Underneath, somewhere in the chemistry of her brain, there was something that could not be reached. I was always aware of this" (Pinto, 216).

At times he tries to pin down the cause of her condition to her repression of a painful memory from the past, her experience of deracination and the subsequent years of deprivation. The only explicit reason provided is Em's aversion to motherhood, which emanates from societal expectations. The remaining underlying causes remain concealed from the readers and the narrator, awaiting extrication. Em herself is oblivious of these causes, except that she is acutely aware of the unnaturalness of motherhood to her. This sentiment could be attributed to her lack of a healthy relationship with her mother and her absentee father. She perhaps never had a role model to emulate. The narrator is aware of how patriarchy and its rigid norms cripple a functional adult by forcing them into conforming and going against their natural disposition. He categorically hates the word 'muddha" as it serves as a reminder of their collective pain "That word again. That venom. Maybe they should've thought about it, not just had a child because everyone did" (Pinto, 170).

He is also aware of the negative consequences of being compelled into motherhood despite not desiring it, acknowledging the harm it has caused not just to herself but also to others around her. He begrudgingly holds Em responsible for his own situation.

It must have disappointed him to learn that she didn't actually miss being a teacher, as she had "no destinies in her hands". Instead, she found satisfaction in her new job and the financial freedom that came along with it, being the only breadwinner in the family, despite the necessity of giving the entire salary to Mae. She was too naïve to understand the exploitation and alienation from her labour and wages. She would rather not stress over the nitty-gritities associated with managing the household. She never had any control over her education, the job or the finances, which left her unprepared for the responsibilities that came with motherhood. This sudden shift without any prior preparation overwhelmed her and led to her aversion to her new role. It was a relief to her that "the wage earner was spared the housework" (Pinto 40), but now she not only had to earn a living but also had to do the chores and make significant decisions. Ignorance, then, for her was bliss. She had to live frugally

even with a substantial salary. She would have to be on the mercy of her mother to even buy a sari for herself on Christmas as she could be dismissed. She felt it inappropriate to ask her mother about her own earnings. She explains that speaking up or any act of protest would have likely led to reprimand or pressure to seek a better-paying job, which she wanted to avoid, as it would bring her an additional burden.

He even suggests that her desire to be a writer may have gone unfulfilled, possibly because she never had the privilege to explore what she likes and what she doesn't. Decisions were always thrust upon her. He surmises that her writings were an outlet for her pent-up emotions and a manifestation of her condition.

He recalls how Em's words would pierce through and hurt him immensely, but he would "always dismiss what she was saying as an emanation of the madness, not an insult or a hurt or a real critique to be taken seriously" (Pinto 135). As she confessed, it was her hallucinations that made her say all those things.

Furthermore, he deliberates on the idea of Duty vis-a-vis familial responsibilities and individual aspirations, as elucidated in the Mahabharata: "How could you do your duty when love beckoned you to do something else? No, that was easy enough. Lord Krishna had dealt with that: you ignored love" (Pinto, 144). He meditates on the discordance between love and duty. Eventually, he realises that it was his station to be a son and prioritises this role by caring for his mother over his career as a journalist, albeit reluctantly.

The concept of Communication Deviance is worth attention as it "has been used as a measure to identify negative family environments. This concept is defined as unclear or incomplete messages and excessive speech rates that result in poor understanding on the part of the receiver. There is some evidence that communication deviance is greater for parents of offspring with schizophrenia" (Docherty). The characters' speeches exhibit a lack of coherence, with Mae failing to construct sentences properly, characterised by noticeable gaps and irregularities. Em, on the other hand, speaks erratically, and her speech abounds in sexual innuendos even while talking with her children. Narrator's thoughts are rife with anxiety and contradictions, which reflect in his speech. It is full of contradictions and paradoxes as he navigates his identity and desires. He craves freedom and normalcy but at the same time feels guilty for desiring it, calling it as tainted freedom:

> None of the three she left behind knew how to go and live; we didn't know what to do with the brief freedom because it was a tainted freedom. And each time Em came home, we all hoped, for a little while, that the pieces of the jigsaw would fall into place again…Home was where I had to gather grace. Home was what I wanted to flee. (Pinto, 147)

The narrator exhibits conflicting emotions throughout the course of the novel. There are times when he wants to evade all responsibilities as he feels occasionally overwhelmed by the amount of attention and emotional toil Em requires yet also experiences jealousy when someone else takes up the caregiving role:

> I was old enough to know that my resentment of this bond was shading into jealousy. I had always been the one she had trusted. She would only take her tablets from me…now Michael was the new mantra. Susan called him the archangel. (Pinto, 213)

There were breakdowns sometimes and in the moments of heightened exasperation the narrator would lose all control and utter unfiltered remarks, "I said I couldn't live with

someone like that. I said I wanted to kill myself. I said I could not bear my life" (Pinto). Pinto has ensured that his characters aren't overly sentimentalized; portraying them as real people, who occasionally feel exhausted, experience frustration, speak untowardly and argue yet love one another against all odds. The narrator perpetually worries he might lose his temper or, worse still, what might happen if Susan were to develop the same behavioral symptoms. He surmises whether he has the strength and courage to face it all once more, and these thoughts unsettle him.

Narrator's obsessive meditations on the concept of death is suggestive of his apprehension about the future and the growing ambivalence of the narrator toward his mother when he says "I feared hundreds of things: the dark, the death of my father, the possibility that I might rejoice at the death of my mother, sums involving vernier calipers, groups of schoolboys with nothing much to do, death by drowning" (Pinto, 58). Despite his love for her, he is aware of the toll that her condition has taken on his mental health. Perhaps there are limitations to how much a person can endure, they succumb and grow weak beyond a point regardless of their love for others. He yearns for moments of peace and freedom to do as he likes. While he obviously doesn't wish his mother's demise, he cannot help control his mind from straying into the prohibited territory, thinking how this event would change his life, for better or for worse. He says:

> And then Em too would die and I would be alone and the whole world would be different. I had no idea how, but it would be, because I would finally have space to myself and then I could exercise the choice to do as I pleased and when I pleased instead of waiting for a stolen moment in the busy life of this BHK. (Pinto, 232)

Based on the extensive research that has been undertaken, it has been documented that: Care giving can be an arduous and debilitating experience and that it constitutes a potential threat to physical, psychological, and social health. Patients with schizophrenia may benefit from the less emotionally-charged environment of a psychiatric hospital, while family members may view re-hospitalization as a respite from the stresses of living with a symptomatic family member." (Cochrane, Goering, Paula, Rogers).

It can be safely concluded that the debilitating effects of schizophrenia extend beyond the individual afflicted. It can significantly wreak havoc on the lives of those closest to the patient as well by inducing feelings of guilt on multiple levels, hampering their social life, pulverising their self-esteem, and impairing their psyche, as exemplified by the character of the narrator.

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