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The Feeling Child: A Study of Precarity in Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom*

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Abstract

The paper examines childhood precarity in the novel *Em and the Big Hoom* by Jerry Pinto. It maps the vulnerable shades of childhood in a precarious family setting as portrayed in this domestic novel. The presence of the mother who is affected by manic depression in the family makes children susceptible to myriad feelings like insecurity, guilt and torment. The stigma, shame and silence in the domestic and public space render them vulnerable and emotionally fragile. The paper argues that the children in the narrative have a central role in balancing the unstable environment of their familial space. They assume the roles and responsibilities akin to that of an adult. They often act as the caregiver in the physical absence of the father figure for the mother who is mentally ill, the metaphorically absent mother. Em's manic episodes and suicidal tendencies are skillfully handled by her son and daughter even when they are grappling to keep their emotions at bay. Her mood swings wound the children with deep and incisive bruises that become indelible scars for a lifetime. The children in their teens are perennially on the watch for Em and her suicidal tendencies, hence they tutor themselves to anticipate crisis. This hyper vigilance ruins the insouciant and carefree nature of adolescence. They are quick to don the cloak of adulthood as the direness of the precarious situation demands it. Their precarious lives are marked by a perennial watch on their mother and the unsafe space she inhabits. Thus the boundary between childhood and adulthood is eroded to a great extent.

Keywords: childhood, precarity, stigma, domestic, manic depression

Introduction

The concept and state of precarity is intimately associated with childhood and its innate vulnerability. The naive and helpless state of children makes them quite susceptible to all forms of threat and violence. Irrespective of the space they inhabit, familial and non- familial spaces

have largely become precarious and minatory. They are also exposed to greater forms of violence and its consequences than in the past, as violence against children has become ubiquitous and universal in many ways. It becomes all the more projected and commonplace with the outright denial of children's rights in the face of abduction, rape and assault. Those who commit violence against children are most often placed in a higher plane of power and hegemony than that of the children. It is always the children who are the powerless lot in the greater picture. Power, control and authority are invariably always in the hands of the usurper than in the usurped, in the case of children. The child protagonists either emerge from a series of violence and setbacks to face the world with enough courage and confidence or they are further pushed into a quagmire of struggles and suffering. The vulnerable child is a stark reality and the sense of precarity enshrouding the vulnerable child is too hard to miss and the society needs to reinvent a more global and effective system to deal with the safety of the child.

Judith Butler's article titled 'Violence, Mourning, Politics' in her book *Precarious Life*: *The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004) written in the wake of 9/11 discusses the ethical dimensions of violence, loss and mourning. Her sustained argument is that human life is innately vulnerable. "This vulnerability, however, becomes highly exacerbated under certain social and political conditions, especially those in which violence is a way of life and the means to secure self-defense are limited." (29) She also offers "mindfulness of this vulnerability" (29) as the only lasting solution. Further she connects themes like grievability to power mechanics wherein certain lives are rendered as grievable.

> Lives are supported and maintained differently, and there are radically different ways in which human physical vulnerability is distributed across the globe. Certain lives will be highly protected, and the abrogation of their claims to sanctity will be sufficient to mobilize the forces of war. Other lives will not find such fast and furious support and will not even qualify as "grievable." (32)

Butler upholds a politics of mourning based on non-violence and peace, which opens up space for the acknowledgement of the vulnerability and interdependence shared by all.
Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011) sketches the pressure and precarity faced by children in the post globalization and neoliberalism eras. Children are at the receiving end of the collective demands of family and society. Their lives are mutually connected with the dreams, aspirations and development of the family and society at large.

This paper analyses precarity of children as portrayed in Jerry Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom* (2012). The novel maps domestic vulnerability in children induced by a parent who is fighting a manic disorder of suicide tendency. The novel sketches a milieu wherein, the children in the family are affected not by an external trauma, but a personal and intimate trauma of mental derangement. The text structures precarity by mapping vulnerability, passive suffering and survival of the child within a family space, where the mother has a deviant behaviour. As the mother is affected by a psychiatric disability, good memories with their mother are numbered yet therapeutic and bad memories, stifling and suffocating. Forgetting becomes therapeutic and forced for the children in the family. The diseased condition of the mother in the family reconfigures the entire childhood of the children where the equation of

parental care and protection becomes inverted in the case of mother and the children acquire the skill of endurance. Thus, often enough the roles are reversed in the household, with children taking care of the mother with constant care and vigil. The physically absent father figure and the metaphorically absent mother figure render a skewed balance in the home and it's the children, the son and the daughter who heroically endures the absences and navigates the family to 'safe' shores.

Pinto attempts to map the myriad shades of pain and suffering felt by an adolescent as he faces the reality of having a "mad, manic, depressive, bipolar" (103) mother. It expresses a spectrum of moods of both the narrator and his mother as they fight their respective battles: the former trying to wade the pool of uncertainty along with his mother and the latter trying to reclaim her sane mind. In the first chapter itself, a glimpse of the reason for her condition is mentioned. "After you were born, someone turned on a tap. At first it was only a drip, a black drip, and I felt it as sadness. I had felt sad before… who hasn't? I knew what it was like. But I didn't know that it would come like that, for no reason. I lived with it for weeks." (12) Thus the first chapter is aptly titled 'Someone turned on a tap' underlining Em's helpless state. Em admits to her son that "It's a tap somewhere. It opened when you were born." (11) The son feels a sudden pang, a sharp pain wincing through him as he hears her remark. Maybe it is this moral obligation that he too is inadvertently responsible for her condition that makes him stay so close to her, almost an ally than a son in the skewed domestic space. A typical nuclear family consisting of Augustine, who is referred as 'The Big Hoom' Imelda and their two children: a son and a daughter named Susan. The son in the family, who remains anonymous, is the speaker who tries to grapple with the reality of living with a mother who is mad and impulsive. They live in Mahim, in a 450 square feet, one-bedroom-hall-kitchen which does not offer any kind of privacy to anyone in the family, especially in the face of unforeseen trials often caused by Imelda.

The young narrator is often at a loss to fathom what is happening at large, all around him, especially in the case of his mother. "I didn't know how to deal with what we were as a family, either. I didn't really know what we were as a family. I only knew that something was wrong with all of us and that it had to do with my mother and her nerves." (10) The young boy recollects snippets of conversation he had with his mother and how certain parts of it stays with him forever. "Thoughts, like electric currents, and inside my mother's head they ran uncontrolled- flashing and sizzling. I carried that image with me through my childhood for what ailed my mother and took her to hospital, sometimes every few months." (10) Thus the mother's presence in the family is perceived as a form of absence, as she fails to fit into her role and responsibilities. The metaphorically absent mother destabilizes the entire balance of the fragile lives around her, owing to her illness.

The intuitive knowledge of the children to relate to a moment of personal trauma is also vividly narrated in the first chapter of the novel. It was an evening when the two siblings went out for a movie. "We had gone together that afternoon, Susan and I, even though The Big Hoom was at work. We were teens on an adventure, watching *Coolie*, the biggest Amitabh Bachchan hit of 1983. The Big Hoom wouldn't have approved, and Em would have mocked, but they

would never find out. We had laughed a lot, happy that we could go out and laugh, like all the others we knew who were our age. And it was a warm afternoon, the kind made for laughing." (14) Later when they reach home, they find the nurse sleeping and Em missing. "Susan knew. She headed straight for the bathroom. There was no reply." (14) When the door opens, they see Em drenched in blood, blood all over her, on her hair and hands and it was dripping from her clothes as well. This was Em's second suicide attempt. The semblance of a perfect evening anticipated by the siblings turns into an utter nightmare which lingers in their minds and memories for quite a long time. The teenaged children are perennially on the watch for an accident or mishap at home, they tutor themselves to anticipate crisis. This hyper vigilance ruins the insouciant and carefree nature of adolescence. It also adds to the precarious air to the homely space they inhabit.

The unending hospital visits on account of Em forms a distressing set of episodes as the novel proceeds. Chapter one ends with a mention of the hospital visit. The young teenager recollects yet another stark statement from her mother with which the chapter comes to a close. "On one of these visits, 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. If that was what she could manage with a single sentence, what did thirty years of marriage do to The Big Hoom?" (17) Em's words cut a deep wound in the mind of the narrator which is cut open every now and then again, letting out fresh blood and pus, thereby refusing to heal. It sabotages his sane self to the extent that he worries whether he will also become mad. The young son's life is marked by emotional neglect and abandonment at the hands of his mother. Feelings of stigma and shame extend to the public sphere from the personal sphere when he is in various societal institutions like a hospital or school/ college.

Em's diaries and letters form a major chunk of the novel as the children were licensed to read them. "We had carte blanche to read Em's diaries and letters. Sometimes she read them out to us, her spectacles perched high on her nose, the black frame hiding her thick eyebrows." (18) The children also exhibit an uncanny sense of cognition that the letters are of little help to map Em's self before she becomes mad. "Perhaps we had understood very early that they would give us no clues to her illness, or ways to reach her on her worst days. Or —and this may be closer to the truth — we were afraid of what we might find there, and afraid of having to deal with it." (19) The boy and the mad mother share a rare rapport, he is the impromptu muse that makes her ramble. He had a furtive purpose in making her talk as he admits later. "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." (33) Every time she encounters a pause in her narrative and forgets where she left the trail of her thoughts, it is him, the unnamed narrator who gently prods her back to where she stopped. Em appreciates this special skill of his and she adds that it is indeed a skill which you can put to good use. "I think it's called being a rapporteur." (57) Thus the son becomes a rapporteur both in the literal sense and in the figurative sense for the ailing mother and her sepia tinted memories. He is a scaffold on which she shifts her weight by passing on countless stories of yesteryears. This hunt for memory trails continues on and is

ongoing until the end of Em and the novel too. Incidentally, it is in the last chapter of the novel, which is titled 'The last great mystery' that Em's death is narrated in a stoic manner.

Confronting the reality of having a mad mother also entails the lurking fear of going mad from the perspective of the child. The son in the novel admits it in the very onset of chapter four, titled 'The prayers of mentals':

> If there was one thing I feared as I growing up … No, that's stupid. 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. But of all these, I feared the possibility that I might go mad too. If that happened, my only asset would be taken from me. .. All I had was my mind and that was at peril from my genes. (58)

The adolescent in the novel tries to make measure of the advantages he has had in his life. Apparently it comes to nil. He admits that he has no home, no friends and no social skills. The clumsiness unique to teenagers is legendary in his case. He also fears the fluctuating moods and temperament. "Em's manic state was often ugly but it is how I remember her: as a rough, rude, roistering woman. In this state, she came at us as an equal. But it was the other Em who was my night terror. As if it were a wild animal with flecks of foam at its mouth, I feared her depression." (59) The son also adds that he found it hard to reconcile the way the word related to the state of mind of his mother, especially when she was dragged down to the unfathomable depths of her vulnerable mind. He describes it as a sudden and unpredictable fall into a patch of quicksand, while the world continues on in the same manner, unperturbed about the fate of the mother and her son. She is sucked into the centre of the earth and things become worse as she smiles bravely while spiraling downwards in that fateful journey. "Some part of you walks on and some part of you is frozen there, watching the spectacle." (60) The son sees the intensity of the pain and torment felt by his mother Em. In fact, it is enhanced in multiple measures as he knows that his mother is trying to live "through the long black night of the mind. She longs for death. She asks if we can give it to her." (60)

As the father of the household goes to work, it is the son who takes care of his mother in these dire moments of suffering. He feels helpless beyond measure. "I don't know what to do or how to respond. I want to kill her. I even know how I will do it." (60) His mind is also wreaking havoc on him just like Em's. The son's role is not that of a passive spectator; rather he is also drawn into the bottomless quagmire along with Em. If Em seems nonplussed by her tongue-in-cheek remarks due to her condition, the son feels the weight of each of her inane remarks laced with bitterness and sarcasm. He desperately keeps trying to find the cause of her mental breakdown at every instance by carefully measuring out each of her words. Also, the son assumes the role of a parent or caregiver towards Em, thus there is a reversal of roles, as the child assumes greater role and responsibility. He tries in the best way possible to balance the unstable environment of their familial space.

An adolescent grappling with the reality of his mother's depression is a striking aspect of the narrative which works like a search motif, an incessant and repeated thought and action that governs the entire narrative. The unnamed narrator, the adolescent boy, wants to hold on

to what is left in the last vestiges of sanity in his mother. He also desperately tries to unearth anything that might provide him some clue to understand her better. The fact that he goes nameless throughout the narrative can be connected to the title character of the novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield. Holden aspires to be a "catcher in the rye"- someone who saves children from falling off a cliff. It can also be seen as a metaphor for stepping into the threshold of adulthood. Holden is sixteen years old and is greatly confused and emotionally disturbed by the chain of events that happens around him. Holden's name is also interpreted as "hold on" thus underlining his desire to hold on. The unnamed narrator in *Em and the Big Hoom* is also trying to hold on to the multiple things around when things fall apart haphazardly and unpredictably. The quotidian business of living becomes a muted battle of survival. "For two or three days, we all live with the knowledge that one of us is gulping for air, swallowing sobs, experiencing pain that will not let up. We will rearrange our lives so that someone is always with her." (61) It is the children of the family who experience an immense despair as their mother flounders in pain, despair and helplessness. Her manic behaviour and suicidal instincts were a commonplace phenomenon for them. The narrator also plots the occasional bursts of happiness and peace in the family. The son outlines that lithium was a miracle drug which provided a temporary respite from the dark night of anguish. He calls it the 'miracle drug'.

The longing for an ordinary mother and the yearning for a humdrum existence is felt along whenever Em feels alright and is mentioned in subtle tones in a desultory manner. Since lithium carbonate was a poison, there were regular blood tests as it could not be accumulated in her body. The brief respite of normalcy provided by the miracle drug was good enough to bring things back to the routine of good old yesteryears. "Em and The Big Hoom had begun to go out for dinner again. They had started taking walks in Shivaji Park together- short ones in Em's lower phases and longer ones when she was feeling active. They would return with something to eat- fruit sometimes, or a big packet of sev-ghantia– as if we were children. We played along, eating bananas or crunchies as if offered a rare treat." (70)

Often the school work and academics of the students are tangentially mentioned in the narrative, whenever the Big Hoom wanted them to let go off the conversation and leave the kitchen. "Don't you chaps have to hit the books? The Big Hoom asked, and we left the kitchen in a rush. I buried myself in matrices; Susan began to read Adorno. It was what we did." (207) Pinto's narrative can be seen as a matrix with four main characters and the 'n' number of events and experiences associated with each of them, involving all or most of them, as in a typical family of four members. A major focus of his narrative is the identification of Em's condition and how it changes over time. "I grew up being told that my mother had a nervous problem. Later, I was told it was a nervous breakdown. Then we had a diagnosis, for a brief while, when she was said to be schizophrenic and was treated as one. And finally, everyone settled down to calling her manic depressive. Through it all, she had only one word for herself: mad." (207) It is interesting to note that the narrator is growing up amid all these acts of naming his mother's condition. He also adds that 'mad' is an everyday, compact and ordinary word in the worldly sense of the word. However, on a personal note, this word wreaks havoc in the life of the

narrator, especially at his school, to live a life as the children of a mad mother. Thus the precarity of the child extends from the personal space to that of the public space. Equally disquieting was the awareness of the possibility of him going mad. “Fight your genes” (209) becomes a sort of mantra to him. “One of the defences I had devised against the possibility of madness was that I would explain every feeling I had to myself, track everything down to its source.” (209) Even after jotting down his thoughts in a methodical manner on a paper, he was left perturbed. “My defences were flimsy. The enemy might already be inside my head and if that were the case, everything else was a straw in the whirlwind. Somewhere, with every meal I ate and every breath I took, I was nurturing the enemy. I thought of clamping down on the errant thought and recognized this as an errant thought born out of despair.” (210) The genetic component in the bipolar disorder unsettles him in a severe manner. The son’s life can be equated to that of a maze, at first he tries to make sense of his mother’s disorder only to realise that he could go mad at any point of time, after which he tries to make sense of his identity and its affinity towards madness.

The narrator’s doctor reassures him by saying that “statistically improbable” (215) which was not enough for him. He explains his perplexity by using an image which brings the dichotomous elements of a child’s world and adult’s world; “when you’re a child, cast the runes. When you’re an adult, ask an expert. I had. The expert had no answer. Wait. Watch.” (215) The last chapter of the novel recounts Em’s death and it begins with a description of a sleepover. The narrator was unable to sleep as he liked to savour every moment of his time at his friend’s place. On the other hand, his sister, Susan used to sleep almost immediately at sleepovers as she used to relish the carefree existence sans the usual worry and anxiety. Em died of a heart attack on the same night which becomes the irony of all ironies. Despite her repeated attempts to commit suicide, death finally makes a toll on her neither with a bang nor with a whimper, and she had left in silence, in sleep. The unexpected death of his mother surfaces his mind with the occasional comments about the similarity of his eyes to that of his mother’s. He conveys the loss of his mother and her absence as a strange grief. Finally, as they were alone after everyone had left and it was only The Big Hoom, narrator and his sister, they feel the unutterable pain and emptiness left behind by Em, which is conveyed in a nuanced manner when he describes home. “Home was already a thinner, lighter space.” (231) He also describes his family as the survivors of a shipwreck. Who salvaged them from the shipwreck is a pertinent question that goes unanswered. Finally the home emerges as an unhomely space with an overarching air of silence and shame. Domestic precarity within the confines of Em’s household is mapped evenly throughout the narrative, with profuse measures of love and tenderness. Thus the narrative leaves a lasting ache as it suffuses the chaos and misery in the household with gentleness and love.

The novel makes a bold move by discussing a mad mother in the house and her chaotic doings with neither guilt nor self-pity. In a world where discussions of mental health become increasingly significant, the narrative offers a respite that things can go wrong and when it does, you can always try to chip in as much as you can. The narrator is a replica of very many unsung heroes who stand by their loved ones, who are deranged in mind, selflessly and silently.

The young son and his sister, Susan was literally wading through a dark and risky swamp for eons for the sake of their mother. The novel shows the many facets of human life and how love can indeed make the world go round. Life is much more than black and white, it's all about the infinite shades of greys in between.

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