



## Illuminating the shadows: Stigma, care, and resilience in Jerry Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom*

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### Abstract

Jerry Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom* (2012) offers a poignant exploration of mental health in 1970s and 1980s India through the Mendes family's experiences with Imelda's (Em's) bipolar disorder. This study examines how the novel portrays the pervasive stigma of mental illness, the inadequacies of institutional care, and the economic and emotional burdens on caregivers while celebrating the resilience and love of the family. Through textual analysis and historical context, this study argues that Pinto's narrative exposes systemic and societal failures in India's mental health landscape, offering a nuanced critique that remains relevant. Drawing on literary and psychological scholarship, this paper underscores the novel's significance in destigmatizing mental illness and amplifying marginalized voices.

**Keywords:** Jerry Pinto, *Em and the Big Hoom*, mental health in India, bipolar disorder, stigma of mental illness, institutional care, caregiver burden, family resilience, Indian literature, 1970s and 1980s Bombay, destigmatization, societal critique, psychological narratives, marginalized voices, cultural taboos

### Introduction

In India, where cultural taboos often silence discussions about mental illness, the lived experiences of those affected are largely ignored. Jerry Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom* (2012), set in 1970s and 1980s Bombay, breaks this silence through the semi-autobiographical narrative of the Mendes family. The novel centers on Imelda (Em), who battles bipolar disorder, and her family—Augustine (the Big Hoom), their daughter Susan, and the unnamed narrator—son—as they navigate societal judgment, inadequate healthcare, and personal sacrifice. Pinto's work is a vital contribution to Indian literature, offering a raw, empathetic portrayal of mental illness that challenges cultural norms. This study addresses the research question: How does *Em and the Big Hoom* illuminate the challenges of mental health in India during the 1970s and 1980s, particularly through stigma, institutional care, and caregiver burden, while highlighting resilience? It argues that through the Mendes family's poignant narrative, Pinto vividly portrays the multifaceted challenges of India's mental health landscape, exposing pervasive stigma, the limitations of institutional care, and the immense burden on caregivers, while celebrating the family's love and resilience as a counter-narrative to systemic failures.

### The Pervasive Stigma of "Madness"

Pinto's novel vividly illustrates the societal stigma surrounding mental illness in India, where "madness" is a label that isolates and dehumanizes. Em's bipolar disorder subjects the Mendes family to judgment, as neighbors and relatives view her condition with suspicion or fear. The narrator recalls, "People would stop talking when we entered a room, as if we carried her madness like a contagion" (Pinto 45). This social exclusion reflects the cultural perception of mental illness as a moral failing or supernatural affliction, common in India during the novel's setting and Jain 47). The family's efforts to conceal Em's suicide attempts and hospitalizations—such as Augustine's discreet handling of her breakdowns—highlight the pressure to maintain a facade of normalcy. The narrator's internal

struggle, fearing he might inherit Em's condition, underscores how stigma permeates even private spaces. Pinto's portrayal critiques a society that ostracizes the mentally ill, amplifying their suffering and that of their families.

### The Limitations of Institutional Care

The novel's depiction of Ward 33, where Em is repeatedly hospitalized, exposes the dire state of institutional mental healthcare in 1970s and 1980s India. Pinto describes the ward as a chaotic space of "screams and smells, where patients were less people than problems" (Pinto 89). The reliance on electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) and minimal patient dignity reflects a system focused on containment rather than healing. The narrator notes, "Ward 33 was not a place for healing; it was a place to be contained" (Pinto 92), emphasizing the dehumanizing conditions. Historically, India's mental health infrastructure was underfunded, with only 0.4% of the health budget allocated to psychiatry in the 1980s (Pathare *et al.* 25). Em's cyclical hospitalizations—temporary stabilization followed by relapse—mirror the broader systemic failure to provide sustained, compassionate care. Pinto's critique aligns with Kumar's findings on the lack of therapeutic resources, which left patients and families trapped in a cycle of despair (Kumar 115).

### The Economic and Emotional Burden on Caregivers

The burden of Em's illness falls heavily on her family, particularly Augustine and the children. Augustine, the Big Hoom, sacrifices financial stability and emotional well-being to support Em, managing her treatments while maintaining the household. The narrator observes, "He was the rock, but even rocks wear down under such weight" (Pinto 134), capturing Augustine's resilience amidst exhaustion. The children, Susan and the narrator, are profoundly affected, their lives shaped by Em's unpredictable moods and suicide attempts. The narrator's fear of inheriting her illness and Susan's withdrawal reflect the psychological toll on their identities. The absence of

external support—such as counseling or community resources—forces the family to rely solely on themselves, a reality reflective of India's limited mental health infrastructure (Sarin and Jain 50). Pinto humanizes the often-overlooked struggles of caregivers, highlighting the economic and emotional costs in a society ill-equipped to support them.

### **Counter-Narratives of Love and Resilience**

Despite its critique of systemic and societal failures, *Em and the Big Hoom* celebrates the Mendes family's love and resilience as a powerful antidote to adversity. Augustine's unwavering commitment to Em, despite her illness's chaos, is evident in moments like his gentle handling of her manic episodes. The children, too, demonstrate resilience, seeking to understand their mother through her letters and stories. Em's humor, such as her self-deprecating remark, "I'm the family lunatic, darling" (Pinto 67), brings levity to their pain, strengthening their bond. This resilience is not a denial of suffering but a defiance of it, as the family finds strength in shared history and love. Pinto's inclusion of these moments challenges the narrative of mental illness as solely tragic, aligning with Dasgupta's view that literary portrayals can reframe psychological struggles as human experiences (Dasgupta 80). This counter-narrative underscores the novel's significance in offering hope amidst despair.

### **Conclusion**

*Em and the Big Hoom* is a profound critique of India's mental health landscape in the 1970s and 1980s, exposing the stigma, inadequate institutional care, and caregiver burden that defined those decades. Through the Mendes family's narrative, Pinto reveals the human cost of a society and system unprepared to address mental illness with empathy or efficacy. However, the novel's portrayal of love and resilience offers a hopeful counterpoint, celebrating the family's strength in response to systemic failures. Its lasting impact lies in its ability to destigmatize mental illness and amplify marginalized voices, contributing to a growing discourse in Indian literature. While mental health awareness has increased since the novel's setting, challenges such as stigma and limited access persist, making Pinto's work enduringly relevant. Future research should explore how contemporary Indian narratives build on this legacy, further bridging literary and psychological perspectives.

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