



## **Exploring the Intersection of Language, Childhood Emotional Neglect, and Family Dynamics in Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom*: An Analysis of Illness Narratives**

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### **APA Citation:**

Sinha, D., & Ali, Z. (2021). Exploring the intersection of language, childhood emotional neglect, and family dynamics in Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom*: An analysis of illness narratives. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 17(2), 1406-1411, 2021. *Doi: 10.53555/jlls.5272*

Submission Date: 24-03-2021

Acceptance Date: 11-05-2021

### **Abstract:**

This research paper analyses the intersection of language, childhood emotional neglect, and family dynamics in Jerry Pinto's novel *Em and the Big Hoom* (2012). The novel portrays the life of a dysfunctional family in Mumbai, India, where the narrator, the son, and his sister cope with their mother's severe bipolar disorder and their father's emotional detachment. The paper draws on the critical perspectives of scholars such as Sarah Ahmed and Cathy Caruth to examine the role of language in the transmission and representation of trauma. This research paper employs the theoretical frameworks of trauma studies and family systems theory to explore the intersection of language, childhood emotional neglect, and family dynamics in Pinto's novel. Through a close analysis of the text, this paper shows how Em's bipolar disorder and her use of language both reflect and are shaped by the family dynamics of emotional neglect.

**Keywords:** language, childhood emotional neglect, emotional abuse, family dynamics, bipolar disorder.

### **Introduction**

In *Trauma and Recovery*, Herman argues that trauma is not simply an individual experience, but rather a social and cultural one. She notes that trauma often occurs within the context of relationships, and that the aftermath of trauma can have profound effects on relationships within a family. Murray Bowen, a pioneer in family therapy, developed the theory in the 1950s, and it has since been expanded upon by other scholars and researchers. One of the key insights of family systems theory is that individuals cannot be understood in isolation from the family systems in which they are embedded (Bowen, 1978). This means that the way in which trauma is experienced and communicated within a family can have significant effects on the individual members of that family. Jerry Pinto's novel *Em and the Big Hoom* is an unconventional memoir of the Mendeses, a Roman Catholic Goan family which explores the intersection of language, childhood emotional neglect, and family dynamics. Set in 1970s–1980s in Mumbai, India, the novel follows the lives of the narrator, his sister Susan, his mother Em and his father The Big Hoom. It describes a family struggling to cope with the emotional challenges of living with a mother who has bipolar disorder. The children's experiences of childhood emotional neglect are reflected in their use of language, which is both fractured and deeply expressive.

### **How Trauma Influences Language**

Caruth's concept of "the unclaimed experience" highlights the way in which traumatic events remain unassimilated and unprocessed due to the limitations of language in articulating them. According to Caruth, language plays a critical role in both the representation and transmission of traumatic experiences (1996).

According to her argument, there exists a proclivity for traumatic experiences to manifest themselves through language that is defined by disorganization and fragmentation. The linguistic representation is hypothesized to reflect the disordered and disjointed qualities of the actual experience. In addition, she suggests that the repetition of traumatic events in language is a means to integrate the experience into one's own narrative. However, this attempt often falls short due to the inherent insufficiency and disorganization of traumatic memories.

Sarah Ahmed examines the role of language in the representation and communication of traumatic experiences. According to Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, language is a crucial factor that shapes the understanding and experience of emotions, including traumatic ones. It is observed that traumatic experiences often exceed an individual's ability to express them, leading to a condition of "speechlessness" in which the trauma remains unexamined and unacknowledged. Ahmed's research emphasizes the importance of considering the social and cultural dimensions of language, particularly regarding its capacity to suppress certain emotions or experiences. Ahmed posits that language possesses the ability to facilitate or hinder the rehabilitation process following traumatic events. The effective use of language can be a significant asset for individuals who have experienced trauma, as it can function as a means of expression and communication that facilitates the acquisition of a sense of self regarding their emotional states. Furthermore, it is worth noting that language can serve as a tool for oppression and silence, thereby sustaining the unequal power dynamics and systemic violence that contribute to the development of traumatic experiences.

Lee and Galynker (2014) examined the relationship between language usage and bipolar disorder by analyzing speech patterns of individuals with bipolar disorder using linguistic analysis techniques. The study's findings indicate that individuals diagnosed with bipolar disorder tend to employ language that is more emotionally charged with a heightened frequency of words associated with feelings of anger and anxiety. Em, who has experienced childhood emotional neglect, employs violent language expressions that depict the damage trauma has caused on her psyche. She exhibits paranoid ideations, expressing a belief that everyone is trying to "poison [her]" and to her own mother, she says "the boy will take you out and shoot you through the head" while laughing (Pinto, 2012, p. 65).

### **Language of Trauma in the Novel**

*Em and the Big Hoom* contains a significant number of soubriquets. 'Em' refers to the mother, Imelda, while 'The Big Hoom' or 'Angel ears', as affectionately referred to by Em, denotes the father, Augustine. The novel comprises a heterogeneous mixture of spoken exchanges, written exchanges, sporadic and fragmented journal entries, personalized insertions, and critical observations of the narrator. In conversations with her son, Em talks about her courtship, the visit to the bookshops, the first day of her job at the American consulate, her anxieties about getting married, among other things. Through the narrative, the narrator tries to flesh out his family's lives as they navigate through Em's illness. The family dynamics, particularly the father's emotional neglect, contribute to the children's emotional distress and their coping mechanisms. The father's absence and lack of emotional support prompt the children to rely on their mother, who is unable to provide them with consistent care due to her illness. The narrator assigns the title "the big hoom" to his father, as the latter would produce vocalizations resembling the sound "hoom" in response to the children's questions. This is reflective of gaps in communication and emotional neglect as displayed using sound responses as opposed to word responses. The narrator's mother, Imelda, is commonly referred to as "Em," a nickname that phonetically resembles the letter "M", from the word "mother." This may be interpreted as symbolic of the small residual maternal aspect of her personality that her disorder had not devoured: "There were times when I could see a lot of my mother in the body whom I met at home. There were times when there was very little of her" (Pinto, 2012, p. 112). The children's use of nicknames for their mother and father also signifies emotional distance.

The narrative is the narrator's testimony to witnessing his mother's degrading mental and physical health. The trauma narrative, for the narrator becomes an attempt to organize traumatic experiences and fill in the gaps of memory. The narrator in the novel is an assiduous researcher—he rummages through his mother's scribbles, letters, notes, books, and family photographs for references—anything which would lead him to the bottom of his mother's "madness." In the process, the narrator also tries to reach into the darker crevices of his own thoughts. The novel illustrates the way in which language can both reflect and shape an individual's experience of bipolar disorder and childhood emotional neglect. The narrative pattern

demonstrates the importance of language as a tool for navigating complex emotions and experiences, as well as the limitations of language in fully expressing the depth of one's inner world.

### **Language of Childhood Emotional Neglect as Trauma**

Childhood emotional neglect has been identified as a type of traumatic experience that can have long-term impacts on an individual's emotional and psychological health. Studies have indicated that childhood emotional neglect has the potential to result in various adverse psychological consequences, such as depression, anxiety, and challenges in establishing and sustaining positive relationships. According to Webb and Musello's *Running on Empty: Overcoming Your Childhood Emotional Neglect*, emotional neglect can have equally detrimental effects as physical or sexual abuse, despite being less conspicuous and more difficult to identify. Widom et al. (2014) suggests that there exists a significant association between emotional neglect experienced during childhood and the likelihood of reporting symptoms of depression and anxiety in adulthood, as well as increased rates of alcohol and drug abuse. The novel encompasses a range of these elements, including the narrator's descent into depression and subsequent substance use disorder (use of marijuana) during his later years.

The theme of childhood emotional neglect is studied through the lens of language in *Em and the Big Hoom*. The main character, Em, experiences challenges related to bipolar disorder and exhibits a linguistic pattern that is significantly impacted by her history of emotional neglect during childhood. According to Bowlby's attachment theory, insufficient emotional support and responsiveness from primary caregivers during childhood can lead to the development of insecure attachment patterns in adulthood. These attachment styles can have long-lasting effects on individuals' psychological well-being and relationships. Em who had experienced emotional neglect in her childhood finds it extremely difficult to maintain a healthy relationship with her kids and husband, aggravated by the onset of her bipolar disorder. This is exhibited in association with a link between childhood emotional neglect and its impact on language, specifically through the use of silences and unspoken words. Em's language usage is characterized by chaos and confusion, as evidenced by the text. When analyzing the text, it can be observed that the narrator recounts his interactions with his mother by stating that, "It would become a family symbol for the cross-connections and misunderstandings that happened when our words went through the prism of Em's illness. They turned into something exotic and bizarre, bearing only a surface resemblance to our meanings" (Pinto, 2012, p. 64).

The novel features an impact of emotional neglect on language through the utilization of repetitive and ritualistic language. Augustine, the father, also known as the "Big Hoom," exhibits repetitive speech patterns that may serve as a coping strategy in response to his spouse's psychiatric condition. Em's language usage exhibits characteristics of reiteration and circularity. The phrase "I don't know" appears seventy-two times in the novel, utilized by different members of the family to convey their cognitive disorientation within the confines of their home.

### **Transmission of Trauma in Families through Language**

Bowen (1978) posited that within the framework of language and trauma, families develop specific behavioral, communicative, and emotional patterns that can become deeply ingrained and ultimately facilitate the intergenerational transmission of trauma. He referred to this phenomenon as "emotional fusion," wherein family members experience a state of being intertwined and face difficulties in preserving their distinct identities. The absence of well-defined boundaries and a feeling of saturation can potentially lead to the development of traumatic experiences. It is similar to the concept of "enmeshment" in families, as described by Minuchin (1974), which refers to a state in which boundaries become indistinct and the needs of the family unit take precedence over individuality. This can result in a lack of emotional support and validation for family members, which can contribute to emotional neglect and trauma. In the context of childhood emotional neglect, the family systems theory postulates that the linguistic and communicative patterns that exist within the family unit can play a role in the perpetuation of neglectful behaviors. In *The Neurobehavioral and Social-Emotional Development of Infants and Children* (2007), Tronick discusses the impact of early emotional experiences on the development of the brain and social-emotional abilities of young children. He highlights the significance of emotional attunement between parent and child as a crucial element in fostering healthy development. He further notes that any disruptions in this attunement can result in difficulties with emotional

regulation and social communication.

According to Cicchetti and Toth (2005), language plays an essential part in emotional development and regulation by enabling individuals to express, acknowledge and understand their emotional experiences. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Caruth observes that the transmission of trauma frequently occurs across generations via the linguistic and communicative practices that are present within families. The novel *Em and the Big Hoom* employs the use of language as an instrument for navigating complex emotions and relationships. The narrator of the novel employs language to convey the emotional disconnect and disassociation that exists between family members. Em's use of poetic and cryptic language is a way for her to communicate her experiences of trauma and pain. Her language is often difficult for her family to understand, and this creates a sense of confusion and isolation for them which further adds to their trauma exposure.

### **Dysfunctional Family Dynamics**

The ramifications of dysfunctional family dynamics on language and communication are significant. As per the findings of Spratt et al. (2012), children who grow up in households characterized by dysfunctional patterns such as neglect, abuse, and unstable parenting, are at a higher risk of encountering difficulties with language and communication. The early experiences of Em with her mother resulted in the formation of idiosyncratic communication patterns that pose challenges for others in terms of understanding. For instance, she makes seemingly random statements about motherhood that reveal the deep psychological damage of a mother's image in her mind, such as "Mother most horrible, mother most terrible, mother standing at the door, mouth full of dribble" (Pinto, 2012, p. 42). According to Christensen and Shenk (1991), families that are dysfunctional tend to exhibit ineffective communication patterns and may frequently experience conflict or withdrawal, leading to a lack of transparent and open discussion among family members, as displayed in the narrator's sister Susan. This condition may potentially result in emotional consequences such as a sense of isolation, skepticism, and an absence of emotional intimacy.

Research has indicated that dysfunctional family dynamics can have long-lasting effects on language and communication skills that may continue to adulthood. According to Moos and Moos (1984), individuals who were raised in dysfunctional families during their childhood may encounter challenges in interpersonal communication, experience trouble in expressing their emotions, and display maladaptive coping mechanisms while dealing with stressful situations. For instance, Em once suddenly locked herself in the bathroom, followed by a prolonged absence. Upon emerging, she stated "I tried it again, ... She was drenched in blood. It was in her hair. It was on her hands. It was dripping from her clothes" (Pinto, 2012, p. 20). The narrator's prolonged exposure to traumatic events and stressors later results in increased withdrawal, as is apparent in his silence in conversations.

According to Bolger, Patterson, and Kupersmidt (1998), it is possible that children who are raised in dysfunctional families may be at a greater risk of developing mental health problems such as anxiety and depression. The narrator of the novel experienced the onset of depressive symptoms during his adult years and encountered significant challenges in describing this information to a medical professional: "I was nurturing the enemy [within myself]. I thought of clamping down on the errant thought and recognized this as an errant thought born out of despair... It was depressing. There seemed to be nothing I could do: no preventive medicine, no mental health vitamins, no mind exercises in the cool of the morning" (Pinto, 2012, p. 162).

### **The Language of Illness Narrative**

The language of illness narrative in the novel serves to illustrate the ways in which language portrays emotional neglect and trauma. As White and Morgan note in *Narrative Therapy with Children and Their Families*, the use of storytelling and language can have a consequential therapeutic effect in helping individuals make sense of their experiences and emotions. The narration of mental illness from the eye of an external observer, here, a son, is important both from the clinical and literary perspective. The 'ailing subject' is situated in the family setting. Pinto's narrator appears to be a reliable narrator. The narrator's conversations are in reported speech to preserve the circularity, freely associative and cultural-linguistic register in which Em speaks.

The novel navigates the liminal space between chronic mental illness in an individual and the dynamics with

the caretakers which, in the Indian context, is the immediate family members, rather than a mental institution. The stigma related to mental illnesses makes the sufferer depend largely on the immediate family which has limited to no resources and inadequate training to deal with the sufferer. A silence is imposed on the voice of the sufferer by the way of the nature of the illness. Through the process of narration, the narrator attempts to reclaim the voice of the sufferer from the oblivion. The primary narration in *Em and the Big Hoom* takes place through the narrator, the son, whereas the undercurrent of secondary narration (through letters/scribbles etc.) is the voice of the mentally ill mother, Em.

Em's language often reflecting the symptoms of her illness, such as disordered thinking, mood swings, and delusions. Her use of language, including metaphor and symbolism, reflects the complexity of her emotions and experiences, which are often difficult to articulate, she randomly bursts into poems and metaphors like "am I a standing red pen?" while no one can figure out what it actually means. One instance of how Em's language changes during her manic episodes can be seen in her frequent use of rhyming and alliteration. For example, when the narrator asks her if she is in pain, she says, "Pain pain go away, come again some other day. Little Johnny wants to play with himself" (Pinto, 2012, p. 112). The use of repeated sounds and rhythms is a characteristic of manic speech and is indicative of the way in which language can reflect an individual's mental state.

### **Em's Condition as Seen in Language**

Bipolar disorder is a mental illness that affects a person's mood, energy levels, and ability to function. The aetiology of bipolar disorder remains elusive; however, extant literature suggests that childhood emotional neglect may confer vulnerability to the onset of this psychiatric disorder. In an examination of adult patients, Hosang et al. (2017) discovered a substantial association between bipolar disorder and emotional neglect during childhood. The findings indicate that there exists a correlation between childhood emotional neglect and the likelihood of developing bipolar disorder. Quide et al. (2020) identified a significant correlation between childhood emotional neglect and heightened negative mood and anxiety, ultimately elevating the likelihood of later developing bipolar disorder. This relationship may be attributed to the effects of emotional neglect on cognitive and emotional processes. In the novel, Em has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, a mental health disorder that is marked by significant fluctuations in mood between episodes of depression and mania. During manic episodes, Em exhibits symptoms of rapid and frenetic speech, which are characterized by a heightened sense of enthusiasm and vitality. During depressive episodes, her sentences are short and clipped before reaching the end. She creates new words and phrases using neologisms and wordplay to reflect her altered perception of reality. Em's mental deterioration, towards the end, can no longer be explained in language, and is accompanied by her passing away in silence: "There had been both, bangs and whimpers. But she had left in silence, in sleep" (Pinto, 2012, p. 181). The observed linguistic and communicative patterns of Em exhibit significant variations contingent upon her mood state, thereby providing an illustration of the effects of bipolar disorder on language usage.

### **Conclusion**

The present study finds a convoluted relation between language, childhood emotional neglect, and mental illness as portrayed in *Em and the Big Hoom*. The paper provides an elaborate depiction of Em's encounters with bipolar disorder, revealing the complex connection between language and the understanding of mental health. Pinto's novel, *Em and the Big Hoom*, highlights the importance of language as a tool in comprehending mental illness and its multi-faceted impacts on the individuals and families dealing with it. Analyzing the linguistic strategies employed by the characters in the novel, this paper argues that Pinto's literary work provides a fascinating critique of the interconnection between language, silence and symbolism in the context of traumatic experiences.

The paper highlights the significance of acknowledging childhood emotional neglect and trauma in the context of family systems. The language used within a family reflects the power dynamics, communication patterns, and emotional connections, as evidenced in family systems theory discussed in the paper. The potential of language as a means of articulating traumatic experiences is established. Furthermore, as White and Morgan note, translating trauma into language can be therapeutic for the sufferer and provide a means of connection with others who have experienced similar experiences. The paper, ultimately, establishes the importance of analysis of language in narratives of illness, specifically mental disorders.

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