

BOOK REVIEW

Between families and doctors

NIKHIL GOVIND

Assistant Professor, Manipal Centre for Philosophy and Humanities, Manipal, 576104 INDIA

Jerry Pinto. *Em and the big Hoom*. Aleph Book Company; 2013. 240 p. Paperback. Rs 248. ISBN-10 9382277315

Jerry Pinto's *Em and the big Hoom* is a rare foray, in Indian writing, into the world of the mentally distressed. Beautifully written, it captures the see-saw of intimacy and affliction in a middle-class family in Mumbai. The illness is not named or pathologised in the initial pages of the book, as it might have been if the aloof, third-person voice were that of a psychiatrist. Rather, we plunge into the world of the family (the minutiae of their everyday sorrows, joys and misunderstandings), and it is only much later that we lift our shoulders above the waves of the prose to realise that the mother is seriously ill. By then, the small world of this vividly pictured family (the unusual title refers to the parents) has already evoked our sympathy. This is especially true of the foul-mouthed, beedi-smoking mother, who flamboyantly pits herself against the large and foreign worlds of the police stations and state hospital wards.

The highly evolved nature of the conversations between mother and son – who think of each other in the more equalising terms of friendship – is represented mainly through the sophistication of their conversation and language. This foregrounds an almost archetypal question in mental health: can someone with such a communicative imaginative sense of language be meaningfully seen as incapacitated or fundamentally ill? Rarely does one come across a bond that is so intense and communication that is so articulate between a mother and son, or even parents and children in general, in an Indian middle-class home. How mordant then, that such intensity and communication blossom in a home where the mother is seriously ill, a situation in which one would think that communication and language should be all the more laboured.

Later, the son goes through his mother's many letters and diaries, obsessively seeking to discover when the original moment of breakdown occurred. The author, even though a beloved son, confesses to making the same mistake many specialist doctors make – going through his mother's writings only with a view to identifying clues pointing to a pathology, rather than seeing the rounded and fleshed integrity of her world-view. Her language provides a window into more than her sophistication and imagination. It also expresses the sentiment of intimacy, her sense of equality, her whimsicality, and her rebellious questioning of not only medical, but also religious, authoritarianism. The book opens with a skillful, humorous conversation on marriage, abortion, Catholicism,

and family.

Since so much of the illness is seen through the child's eye, it gives us a sense of the bewilderment and helplessness with which the patient becomes aware of the unravelling of her mind. As much of the book is written using the literary device of the child's eye, the reader is forced to be aligned with the child's acute mixture of confusion, rage and fear. Equally bewildering is the authority that generic mental health institutions, medications, the law, and the culture of mental healthcare had in the Mumbai of the 1970s and 1980s. Family eras were plotted pharmaceutically according to medication prescribed by the wards—in other words, the memoirist remembers whole chunks of their lives by the particular medication the mother was taking for that set of years. The “summer of lithium carbonate” followed the relatively ineffectual age of Largactil and Depsonil. In the book, the family tries to judge whether the doctors hurt their mother/wife on the basis of the level of her resistance to being taken back to Ward 33. There is a thin line, if any, between submitting oneself to the hospital voluntarily and doing so involuntarily. The policeman must be paid so that he does not send you to jail for attempted suicide.

This memoir restores the subjective side of mental patients and their lives. It touches upon the elements of romance, desire, gossip and secrecy. Mundane everyday events, such as long conversations in person and over the telephone are given importance, for this is indeed where much of the stuff of everyday family life happens—not only in the big events of meeting the doctors, visiting the asylum, but of answering the telephone, even repressing incipient illness (“the black drip inside”) so that the children can study for their examinations. In a word then, a full and rounded humanity is accorded even to those people afflicted with what the book delicately calls the “condition”. And it does this by acknowledging how those who are un-afflicted, especially as children, live with the fear of what they may inherit. It is heart-rending to read about a child who grows up wondering if killing his/her mother is the kindest thing that he/she can do for her (for she pleads for it when ill). The book explores how different caregivers relate differently to mental illness. The illness of a wife can place a heavy burden on the father of young children. Even today, it seems impossible to organise support groups for caregivers, be it in a town or a city as large as Mumbai. Young children, who are forced to become precocious caregivers, grow up feeling constantly inadequate in the face of the hurdles – whether

legal, administrative, or related to the police or hospital – they come up against on account of their ill mother. The memoir is as much about fathers and sons living in such circumstances. Illness re-orientates not just the relationship with the ill person, but also the relationships between the caregivers, as well as their relationship with the rest of the family. The stress of the

situation paradoxically brings the fathers and children closer together. Again, this topic has hardly received much attention, either in the literary or psychiatric field, in India.

It is a book whose (non-psychotic) voices linger in your head, and makes you wish to eagerly return to it—which is startling given how full of loss it also is.

AUTHORS, PLEASE NOTE

IJME follows the ICMJE Recommendations for the Conduct, Reporting, Editing and Publication of Scholarly Work in Medical Journals (<http://www.icmje.org/icmje-recommendations.pdf>.) With reference to authorship, ICMJE has added a fourth criterion for authorship, namely: "Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved". Authors are advised to consult the guideline, available from: http://www.icmje.org/new_recommendations.html)