

# Jerry Pinto's Em and the Big Hoom: Heteronormativity and the Text of Madness

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**Abstract:** This paper is an attempt to explore the concept of heteronormativity through its application in *Em and the Big Hoom* written by Jerry Pinto. Heteronormativity's abstract presence in the society will be depicted along with its deep-rooted involvement in the novel through the conventional duties associated with motherhood.

**Keywords:** Heteronormativity, motherhood, assigned gender roles

## I. INTRODUCTION

The term heteronormativity was coined to denote that the society was predominantly heterocentric and any deviations from this would result in repercussions. The 'standard' sexual orientation is to be heterosexual and anything that deviates from this is deemed to be out of the 'normal' context. This term, however, started to grow into a much larger meaning which included behaviour patterns, gender roles and cultural aspects. Jerry Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom* engages with structures and discourses of heteronormativity. The mode of this engagement varies from the reproduction of said discourses and structures to subversion of the same. The modes at which heteronormativity now operates is very innate in the society that the people no longer act but lives in the assigned gender roles. Em is the only character who deviates from the said roles through her schizophrenia which she uses as a wagon to subvert the public norms and be true to her intuitions. Her madness lets her to deviate from the heteronormative precepts and sometimes even question them. People living the society have to follow certain norms which enables them to be branded as 'normal'. However, the concept of being normal or what normalisation means and what it means to be an ideal mother in the urban Indian context is shown throughout the novel.

## II. OBJECTIVE

The heteronormative norm works in insidious ways through multiple networks, structures, and institutions one of them being family and its various facets – I'll be looking at various forms of heteronormativity existing in the society, and from the novel *Em and the Big Hoom*, motherhood specifically in this paper. The individual elements are embedded within said networks and it is through them that the norm is often reproduced and sustained, and as in the case of Em, sometimes simultaneously subverted.

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## III. HYPOTHESIS

The questions I hope to answer are:

- How has the term heteronormativity evolved from its initial implication which focused primarily on sexuality?
- What position does heteronormativity hold in the society or how does heteronormativity implicitly enter into the social life of a person?
- How does it assign gender roles by consulting Jerry Pinto's novel *Em and the Big Hoom* and seeing it as a text of madness?

## IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

An intensive critical close reading of the novel has been required in order to tease out the instances where the characters break out of heteronormativity. I have stated the mode they have used against what they are intending to break away from.

## V. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

- "EXPOSING HETERONORMATIVITY." *Queering Marriage: Challenging Family Formation in the United States*, by Katrina Kimport, Rutgers University Press, 2014, pp. 130–149. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hjd1t.10](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hjd1t.10).
- "Heteronormativity, Homophobia, and Home." *Peruvian Lives across Borders: Power, Exclusion, and Home*, by M. CRISTINA ALCALDE, University of Illinois Press, Urbana; Chicago; Springfield, 2018, pp. 118–141. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctv28685f.8](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctv28685f.8).
- Geller, Pamela L. "Bodyscapes, Biology, and Heteronormativity." *American Anthropologist*, vol. 111, no. 4, 2009, pp. 504–516. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/20638722](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20638722).

## VI. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Heteronormativity is defined as the state at which heterosexuality is considered to be normative. It is the belief that people fall into distinct and complementary genders, man and woman, with natural roles in life. It says that heterosexuality is the only sexual orientation, or only norm, and states that sexual or marital relations are most, or only, fitting between people of opposite sexes. There are several instances when one person could make heteronormative comments or actions which are related to either sexuality or gender roles. In *Em and the Big Hoom*, Em can herself be seen to having internalised



the heteronormative construction of what constitutes motherhood. By heteronormative construction, I am suggesting that extremely specific definitions and expectations are produced in relation to what constitutes motherhood and its experiences, and these definitions and expectations are naturalized to the extent that they become the transcendental universal truth on the entire phenomenon of motherhood. Regarding Susan's birth and childhood, Em comments, "...the doctor showed me how to carry her, to feed her, and I thought, 'I should know this stuff, shouldn't I?'" (52). Em's comment reveals her own internalisation of the dominant heterosexual norm wherein motherhood is a natural phenomenon implying that all women are born with the innate qualities and knowledge of being a mother. Em seems to believe that she must always already know how to be a "perfect" mother – a category which includes carrying and feeding her newborn child among a plethora of other things. The fact that it is her first child and that she has never had any experience of this kind seems to recede in the background as the heteronormative idea of women as natural/innate/inborn mothers looms large in the foreground. In such a construction, motherhood is taken for granted as intrinsically a part of womanhood itself. At the same time, in the same vein and instance, Em begins to hit upon the socially constructed element of the alleged natural state of motherhood, "I mean, all those dolls. They were about learning the ropes, no?". Here, the formative years of childhood within the site of the family and the seemingly innocent space of play are exposed to be modes of conditioning individuals into specific roles which the society expects them to inhabit and enact out. The dolls represent one of the myriad means which are used to train women into the supposedly most fundamental aspect of the alleged natural state of "womanhood", that of the caregiver, the nurturer, the mother. What survives ultimately in the collective as well as individual memories of societal elements and structures is the ultimate, constructed transcendental truth of motherhood – which is that of women as natural mothers/nurturers – while the processes of constructions of such meanings are themselves obscured and made remotely inaccessible<sup>1</sup>. Em's occupation of the marginalised space of madness allows her to bare and critique some of these processes of meaning-making which arise out of the hegemonic rule of the dominant heterosexual norm. The text of madness enables Em to occupy a subversive position in relation to heteronormativity and it allows us, as readers, to interrogate the facets of the heteronormative structures which are constructed to be universally consistent natural truths. The naturalized aspect of the discourse of motherhood is brought into the realm of scrutiny, critique and doubt through the following words of Em, "...But motherhood ... You're given something totally dependent, totally in love with you and it doesn't seem to come with a manual" (52). These words of Em force us to think about the complexities and difficulties which women face when they're expected to always already know the tricks and truths of motherhood. Em talks about a lack of manual which exposes the heteronormative conceptions of

motherhood where a "good woman" and a "good mother" would not need a manual as being a mother would be understood as a natural part of being a woman. The fact that Em emphasises upon her struggles with her own experience of motherhood and her need for a manual brings the aforementioned heteronormative claim into the realm of scrutiny. While the threat of perceiving Em's struggles as something which is lacking within herself (an individual aberration as opposed to a problem in the discourse which Em is critiquing) and which may be deemed not only abnormal but also unnatural looms large over the entire narrative which constantly enunciates a lack in the familial structure of the narrator who traces this lack repeatedly to the figure of Em and her madness, her following astute observations regarding what it means to be a mother for a woman under the oppressive rule of heteronormativity make it extremely difficult to dismiss her as merely an unnatural outcaste as heteronormativity would have us do, "I saw what children do. They turn a good respectable woman into a mudd-dha. I didn't want to be a mudh-dha. I didn't want to be turned inside out. I didn't want to have my world shifted so that I was no longer the centre of it. This is what you have to be careful about, Lao-Tsu. It never happens to men. They just sow the seed and hand out the cigars when you've pushed out a football through your vadge. For the next hundred years of your life, you're stuck with being someone whose definition isn't even herself. You're now someone's *mudd-dha!*" (133). In this extremely perceptive speech on the workings of the institution of motherhood within heteronormative regimes, Em exposes it to be precisely that – an institution. The position of women vis-a-vis the discourse of family and motherhood is demonstrated to be a fragile and vulnerable one. Em hits at the very heart of the workings of these discursive institutions as she emphasises upon how completely the personal identities of women are subsumed into the supposedly greater category of motherhood. She can label exactly the modes in which a woman's identity is rewritten once she becomes a mother through a questioning of the very definition of motherhood itself. She exposes this definition to be formulated in a manner where the meaning in the term is produced not through the person being defined, but through another entity around whom this person's existence must be centred now. This definition reflects the very material consequences of the immensity of the patriarchal expectations of women as Em forces us to recognise the effects of motherhood upon a woman's life – she is no longer the centre of her own world and she must redefine her entire everyday material and otherwise existence around that of her child. Furthermore, she exposes the labour which goes into the phenomenon of motherhood while simultaneously indicating at another problematic aspect of this "natural" state of the family where there is an inequitable distribution of the burden of bearing and rearing the child between the mother and the father. When Em makes women's labour as mothers visible, she demystifies and disrupts the patriarchal glorification of motherhood and instead, she exposes the exploitative nature of the heteronormative conception of motherhood, "You were my two dividends ... But what an

<sup>1</sup>This can be understood in terms of the Foucauldian idea of the formation of the "pre-judicial subject" and the discursive structures of the state, law and the society which mask the constitutive processes of said subject.



investment. My life” (134).Em’s occupation of the subversive space of madness places her in a precarious position in relation to her critique of heteronormative discourse as while it allows her to open these discourses to interrogation owing to her simultaneous positioning at the centre of a seemingly heteronormative family and her marginal position owing to her “madness”, it simultaneously also makes her critique vulnerable and easier to dismiss owing to her latter position.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Em occupies both the centre and the margin and it is the margin which allows her to perceive and critique the problematic workings of the centre. Furthermore, it is her marginalisation which makes her seem less of a threat to heteronormativity and which allows her to give voice to her critique of the same. She is able to say everything that she does say about motherhood to her children as they can cope with these realities by juxtaposing her narrative with the narrative of madness. While heteronormativity would threaten to subsume Em’s critique by boxing her in the category of the “mad woman” whose rants cannot be taken seriously (as minorities and marginalised never are by dominant structures), the text of madness becomes an enabling tool for us as readers to examine questions which Em foregrounds through her complex position in the narrative as an intellectual guide to the narrator as well as his co-author of said narrative. Heteronormative readings would strive to render Em’s critique powerless by marginalising her, but the text of madness restores her position of power by making her the centre and the author of the narrative in many ways.

## REFERENCES

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