

Problematizing the Postmodern Condition in *Em and the Big Hoom*

David Paul

Division of English, School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Chennai, India

G Alan

Division of English, School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Chennai, India

Abstract—This paper investigates and problematizes the postmodern condition in Jerry Pinto's novel, *Em and the Big Hoom*. The complex, medical, psychoanalytic, and psychiatric history of the characters' psyche is traced out in the novel. Postmodernism is an outgrowth of Modernism. It denotes the status of contemporary society, the revolutions, modifications, and shifts in science, literature, and arts. Taking into account all of the significant shifts from Modernism to Postmodernism, the study explicates Postmodernism as a movement, the Postmodern era along with the postmodern condition, and the postmodern tenets. The Psyche of the postmodern characters as presented by the author in his psychological fiction is profoundly probed in the paper. There is an intense focus on how important tenets like fragmentation, non-linearity, intertextuality, and playfulness are inherent in the novel.

Index Terms—postmodernism, postmodern condition, paranoia, problematizing, psyche

I. INTRODUCTION

Postmodernism cannot be constrained to a concrete definition. It's a departure from Modernism. Lyotard, a well-known critic of the postmodern movement interrogated "What is Postmodernism?" in his book, *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), describing it as "the radically shifted status of knowledge and its dissemination." Postmodernism likely confines itself from launching a single definition. Also, Hassan (1998) says aptly: "I know less about postmodernism today than I did thirty years ago" (p. 03). Lyotard (1979) says, "[Postmodernism] designates the state of our culture following the transformations, which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature and the arts" (p. 09).

Harvey (1989), in *The Condition of Postmodernity*, speculates the argument by classifying Postmodernism as: "modernist sentiments may have been undermined, deconstructed, surpassed, or bypassed, but there is little certitude as to the coherence or meaning of the systems of thought that may have replaced them" (p. 42). The shifts brought about by the postmodernist thought have paved the way for new strategies to be applied in literary works. Various literary devices and techniques are used in postmodern literary works. Fragmentation, parody, paranoia, dark humour, an untrustworthy narrator, authorial self-reference and self-reflexivity, and so on are among them. "Language constructs immense edifices of symbolic representations that appear to tower over the reality of everyday life like gigantic presences from another world" (Harvey, 1989, p. 130). So, Postmodernism discards traditional forms of writing as found in Modernism.

Currie (1998) says that Postmodern novels are usually considered as anti-realist. The link between fiction and reality is a "central concern" of a Postmodern novel. They create fictitious realms just to reveal them as crafted constructs. They like thematizing their own theatricality, frequently by erecting an internal barrier between fiction and reality, allowing for meditation on the relationship between fiction and reality, as well as the irony that both fiction and reality are, in the end, fictitious. They favor illusion-breaking devices, particularly those that emphasize the presence of an author, such as the intrusive authorial narrator who steps in to declare a fiction's fictionality, or the "surrogate author": a figure within the fictional world who takes on the role of an author, or one that is analogous to the role of an author. "Meleipsis," which is commonly characterized as frame-breaking, is a crossing of some uncrossable border between distinct levels of reality or being, such as when a character goes out of a fiction or an author enters into it to interact with characters. Metafictions are fictions about fiction, self-aware fictions, and fictions that include critical and theoretical reflection in their fictional worlds. They are "historiographic metafictions" for a generation: fictions that raise concerns about history philosophy, the truth or knowability of historical representations, or the narrative strategies that give shape to historical data (Currie, 1998).

He also points out that Postmodern novels are "intertextual novels. They are acutely conscious of their situation in a world awash in representations, as well as their place within a tradition, or a history of representations, which includes other books. They are citational in the sense that they quote, allude to, refer to, borrow from, or absorb our works as a method of dramatizing their own relationship with the outside world by including the line between fiction and reality within a fiction. They honor intermediality, or the depiction of connections between novels and other media such as

films, television shows, photographs, and historical works. They favor the identification of a specific, typically well-known intertext in the form of a book, frequently in order to rewrite it, especially from a point of view that is critical of it. They favor identifying a specific, typically well-known intertext in the form of a novel for the goal of rewriting it, particularly from a point of view that was marginalized in, or not represented by, the original.

Novels set in the postmodern era describe a current stage of global culture influenced by new technology. The figurative shrinkage of the globe into a village, as well as the paradoxical forces of uniformity and diversification that define the contraction, are reflected in the form and substance of postmodern literature. On a content level, the postmodern novel depicts the contemporary phase of capitalism's world of simulation, expansion of representational technology, and personal and social archiving. They represent a world where simulations are becoming progressively inseparable from the objects they replicate, and where inseparability is an intrinsic part of the commodification process. They symbolize, above all, questions of cultural uniqueness and identity in the context of global, cultural uniformity. At the level of form, globalization and technological innovation resulting in experimental narrative forms, particularly those that replicate the interrelatedness of a global village, the loss of linearity in temporal experience, or the tendency to engage the present as a future depiction or recollection in technologically assisted ways.

“For to define the postmodern in a strictly temporal sense would be to immediately exclude a plethora of literary styles and works that would otherwise qualify as benchmarks of high-postmodernist writing. The list of scandalous exclusions would include – but would definitely not be limited to – Francois Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1693-94), Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1615), Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759), Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (1729), Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) as well as James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, a novel published on 4 May 1939, four months before the start of the second world war.” (Parui, 2018, p. 01)

Postmodernism is the ‘after’ of modern or now. It imbues postmodernist literature with the inability of definition and confinement that has come to characterize it. “This impossibility finds its aesthetic ally in the postmodernist avant-garde that permanently problematizes any division between high and low culture, tribute and parody, seriousness and flippancy” (Parui, 2018, p. 1). The postmodern literature may thus be defined as an “entanglement, an aesthetic of anti-authoritarianism and permanent polyphony that characterizes the works of Rabelais as well as Rushdie, Kafka as well as Calvino, Cervantes as well as Spiegelman” (Parui, 2018, p. 2). As a problem of presuppositions and essence, postmodernism subjects itself to its own critical tools and creative strategies in an inescapable loop of self-reflexivity and self-critique. Postmodern poetics has become a celebration of “simultaneity, interruption, incompleteness, and incongruity” (Parui, 2018, p. 3).

Meta fictionality, which involves self-referentiality, is a hallmark of postmodern writing. Metafiction is a narrative that does not simply tell a story; it punctuates the act of narrative by blurring the line between fact and fiction, “problematizing” the relationship between author and characters, demanding the notion of authorship, and, overall, including representations on the theory of fiction within the so-called fictional space. Postmodernism is a kind of writing that refers to the most general, general tendencies. There is a claim that most postmodern novels are historical. Postmodernism is defined by its inconclusiveness. The postmodern narrative not only “problematizes” the Aristotelian formula of a chronological and tripartite division of a plot (beginning, middle, and end), but it also subverts the concept of “narrative closure” by implying, as in Fowles' book, the potential of numerous endings. In general, final and conclusive assertions are regarded as reductive and essentialist, and a postmodernist should mistrust or avoid them. In this light, one may use Sarah Woodruff's mysterious persona as an example.

Similarly, the postmodern condition embedded in the novel, *Em and the big Hoom* is problematized in this article along with intensive close reading and investigation of the various postmodern tenets discovered in the novel.

II. ANALYSIS

According to Modernism, the world is fragmented. The personality of every individual is schizophrenic. The major reason behind this is the radical change the world faced due to World War II. They are isolated as they are unable to alter to the new world order. They are forced into the state of being outcasts. And this is how modern man is considered schizophrenic. In terms of postmodernism, the modern man's schizophrenia turns into paranoia. This feature of language and form itself establishes a powerful reason for the paranoia of the era. We encounter split personalities in the modern world. But In the Postmodern era, we encounter multiple personalities.

In relevance to the study on paranoia, Mandic (2014) describes paranoia as “a symptomatic condition of post modernity” (p. 143). Paranoia as a postmodern condition is differentiated from the postmodern tenets. And It is apparent that postmodernity is a new kind of thought and attitude for the individuals of the new era to actually adapt. In this regard, the case of Dr. Schreber of Freud can be recognized as a good instance for the definition of paranoia of Mandic. In Dr. Schreber's case, “Freud speculates, paranoia is a defense and a strategy of adaptation” (qtd in Flieger, 1997, p. 91). When an era changes, the knowledge varies as well. One faces the challenges of the new upcoming age. The individual happens to alter his/her mindset. This force for alteration has become more problematic in the postmodern age. Paranoia is considered to be a defense from the challenges of a new period and a strategy of adapting to the new era.

Em, the narrator's mother is affected by Paranoia, “For two years, Em did not suffer the terrors of twitching depression, nor were her maniac states stratospheric. This did not make her an ordinary mother. She still refused to have

anything to do with the kitchen. She still thought baths were a necessary evil and tried, like the boys of hundreds of American cartoons, to avoid them. She still laughed immoderately and wondered aloud whether there would be news in the paper about trees because there was a white light shining out of the subabul outside our balcony" (Pinto, 2012, p. 63).

The term paranoia has an "extraordinarily complex medical, psychiatric and psychoanalytic history" (Bersani, 2003, p. 145). It is largely taken to mean "the fear of persecution." The symptoms of paranoia naturally include a greater sense of anxiety, frequently to the stage of delusion and irrationality, a craving for centrality, and the (imagined) loss of autonomy and feelings of disempowerment. Julia Kristeva defines this unsettling capacity of fear, presenting that "phobia bears the marks of the frailty of the subject's signifying system" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 35). The inception of terror and paranoia in postmodern American works has designed a discrete aesthetics. Postmodern artists and writers like Thomas Pynchon and David Lynch are the most prominent ones who employ desolation and excessiveness to voice out the horror, deception, outrage, absurdity, bizarre and surreal state. For Pynchon and Lynch, "the real-world terrors of war, slavery, colonialism, corporate corruption, the Hollywood industry, and sexual violence ground the horror of their narratives" (Jarvis, 1998, p. 189). Moreover, Pynchon and Lynch continually investigate "the geographical imagination [...] which constitute[s] a dissident remapping, of variable effectiveness, of the hegemonic fable of North America as a post-industrial society" (Jarvis, 1998, p. 51).

Allan Lloyd-Smith presents postmodernism and its "populist tendency, its lurid, low-rent sensationalism and exploitation of affect, its opening up of tabooed realms [...] its embrace of the fragmentary" and its "use of paranoia" (15). He records the cultural anxieties about race, gender, class, and sexuality and also a denial of order and hierarchical power systems formulated to oppress, marginalize and exclude. Pinto presents the horrors of everyday life, reflected in his narratives, and therefore, revealing the dark side of his childhood. His narration and characters unveil all the inherent sufferings and apparent paranoia. He exposes the everyday life where the nightmares of reality prevail.

The reality portrayed by Jerry Pinto, the family saturated with the bizarre, radically projects the postmodern condition and tenets. The novel highlights the condition of present-day society, in an age of abundant, almost limitless, information and endless sources of fear and paranoia. This particular work is defined by depression, chaos, and affection. It presents a family where these concepts are normal.

With the statement, "the world of indiscriminating cynicism, where no one is trusted and nothing is believed, is in many ways a comfortable one," Jonathan Schell presents an excellent explanation of skepticism and paranoia. (Coale, Qtd, 01). This sense of paranoia is reproduced in Jerry Pinto's monumental work, *Em and the Big Hoom*. In *Em and the Big Hoom*, there are many indications of skepticism and paranoia. Em, the main character, is a fantastic example in this regard.

The Mendes family is unlike any other. Pinto's life is described. They are from Goa and live in Mahim, Bombay, in a one-bedroom flat with a hall-kitchen. Imelda, Augustine, their daughter Susan, and their son, the story's narrator, are all members of the family. Em and the Big Hoom are the children's nicknames for their parents. Em is a family member who is insecure and unreliable. While the Big Hoom works hard at his office, she spends most of her days at home, preparing tea and smoking beedis. Em suffers from mental depression, which is the reason for this. The Mendes family is overflowing with real and unconditional love, but it is put to the test by the continual presence of darkness, which threatens Em at any moment.

"My mother is now in a state where her mind tortures her. It will not even let her sag into apathy. Sometimes I see her body twitching a little in pain. Sometimes I see her forcing herself into a rigid stillness. Nothing will help her answer whatever savage questions her mind is asking. This is darkness and all that we have as a remedy are pills. They don't work. Not when she is this way. My mother lives through the long black night of the mind. She longs for death. She asks us if we can give it to her. 'Kill me,' she says on days when the pain is so bad that she is panting with it, small barely audible sobs. 'Let me die.'" (Pinto, 2012, p. 60)

The children strive to cope with their changed mother, who is suffering from paranoia and insane sadness and is trying suicide. The family works together to care for her as they try to find serenity in the midst of Em's dreadful illness. When Em is in good health, the novel's environment is topped with the joy of her charming oddity; when Em is in the throes of her disease, the setting appears to be twisted in the domination of her anguish. To his son and daughter, the Big Hoom is a caring enigma. He is often concerned about the chaos in the house. His love for Em is palpable at all times. To the children, his love is a mystery.

Their son is interested in learning more about his mother's illness. He likewise tries to control his own peculiarity in order to avoid becoming insane. He recounts his parents' early years together. The mother, Em's journal entries, and letters to his father, the Big Hoom, add a new layer to the storey, her voice distressingly humorous at times and brutally cruel at others. Em and the Big Hoom's love, sympathy, and care are as stirring as a romantic tale, and as upsetting. Jerry Pinto, the author, treats mental illness as a form of sad poetry. The Mendes family is a mishmash of amusing nicknames, odd anxiety and comedy, and unconditional acceptance of one another. The youngsters are confronted with a twisted familial scenario. Pinto, on the other hand, has fashioned a wild, definitely original character in Em, and in the family that was once happy and now ripped apart by her paranoia.

"Em's maniac 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." "Depression seemed to suggest a state that could be dealt with by ordinary means,

by a comedy on the television or an extravagance at a nice shop.” But “Em’s depressions were not like that.” (Pinto, 2012, p. 59)

The mother is admitted to a hospital, “She was in Ward 33 again, lying in bed, a bed with a dark sheet and a view of the outside.” But there is a lack of seriousness and inclusion of playfulness and the narrator immediately switches on to a man and a woman getting out of a taxi. The man took the woman’s hand. Em says that the Indian Women fall ill due to this, adding that the husbands would hold their hands.

One of the easily recognizable elements of postmodernism is the concept of “play” (which is connected to Derrida’s philosophy or the concept presented by Roland Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text*). Rather than the modernist hunt for meaning in a chaotic environment, the postmodern author dismisses the idea of meaning in a playful sense. Though the notion of using these in writing did not originate with the postmodernists (the modernists were frequently playful and satirical), they were essential elements in a number of postmodern works. The postmodernists consider grave subjects in a kind of playful and humorous way. A Postmodern work of art never takes the reader into a grave attitude. As postmodernism normally discards reality and metanarratives, a lot of seriousness formerly connected with diverse forms of modernism is abandoned. Postmodernism in all facets is playful, including, the play of language, meaning, structural forms, and images. The humor and playfulness with which it handles the very serious, grave, and delicate issue of mental instability and depression is a fascinating way to approach in a postmodern way. The novel is firmly humorous dealing with serious issues throughout.

The narrative of the novel is non-linear and fragmented. It keeps shifting. The plot goes forth in an analepsis (flashback) technique where the past and present of the characters are juxtaposed. Each fragmented chapter is given titles such as Someone turned on a tap, Hello buttercup, If he should try and rape you, the prayers of mentals, The ABC Professions, I am no I, The Disgusting Bitch, Three to get married, You won’t do anything silly? All is discovered. Let us flee, Electro-Convulsive Throppy, Who wants a hot flush? The last great mystery. The language is fragmented as well. The examples detected in the title are, I am no I, Three to get married.

III. CONCLUSION

The Salient features of the postmodernist fiction can be traced out as a self-reflexive, self-conscious metafictional aesthetic with an responsiveness of its own erected quality, a resistance against and a retelling of all grand and totalitarian narratives of nation, culture, identity and history, an upgrade of the playful and the problematic that questions the perceptiveness informing the politics of presuppositions, an inclination towards textuality and narrativity: transforming time, identity, space, and history into texts and narratives that can be constructed as well as deconstructed, an economy of intersubjective intertextuality that is tangled to the metafictional quality of the narrative, whereby the fictional text tactically refers to, draws on, imitates, pays tribute to, parodies and creates mutable meanings out of other fictional texts furtively as well as outwardly.

What is instantly discovered in the “indicative (but by no means exhaustive) list of features above is a sense of polyphonic praxis that characterizes the postmodern problematic where the high and the low, the real and the fictional, the organic and the inorganic, are all endlessly enmeshed” (Parui, 2018, p. 3).

“Genre, like other formal aspects of literature, has been subjected to profound scrutiny over the past three decades’ advance of postmodernism. Organizing the literary system into kinds – poetry, novel, drama; lyric, romance, tragedy – is no longer the transparent task it once seemed to a New Critical world steeped in classification. Within postmodernism, the poststructuralist critique of genre has focused on the fact that traditional genre theory has almost always been either merely descriptive or, worse, rigidly prescriptive, failing or not even attempting to explain the phenomenon of cross-textual patterning in literature.” (Hart, 2017, p. 1265)

At a generic level, the text *Em and the big Hoom*, is a mixture of autobiography, narration, and conversational. The focalization on the characters keeps changing as well. Hence, it proves itself to be a postmodern text, breaking the conventional plot structure. The postmodern feature of intertextuality is explicit too. The text, *Em and the big Hoom* is intertextual as Freudian Psychoanalysis is embedded in mother’s conversations (Pinto, 2012, p. 8). Imelda’s manic world is infatuated with sex and seduction. It is believed that she involves herself in tabooed conversations with her son and daughter. She also narrates about illegitimate pregnancy and escapes from that as: “If you do put a loaf in some poor girl’s oven, you will take her to a government place, you will announce that you are Mr. and Mrs. D’ Souza... And after it’s done you will take her somewhere to rest and relax and weep and you will stay with her until she can go home.” She presents a postmodern narration of Imelda is a ‘foul-mouthed blob of scum’ to the son. Em is a typical Indian Postmodern woman with cigarettes or Beedi, breaking the mainstream projection of a woman who is supposed to be the primary care giver. The novel provides a contrasting picture of the father. Though the father is compensating for the loss, he became frightened when Em spoke about the cock and curt business, the Big Hoom slowly calmed the pressure by amplifying Freud, ‘hypothesis’ replacing ‘Oedipus Complex’.

Em’s conversations are an indication of her educated mind but going through paranoia. She breaks the conventional, stereotypical state of the woman but she is projected as a woman in her postmodern condition of paranoia. Thus, paranoia as a postmodern condition is problematized and the postmodern tenets including Non-linearity, Playfulness, Intertextuality and Fragmentation are situated in the novel, *Em and the big Hoom* by Jerry Pinto.

REFERENCES

- [1] Barry, P. (1995). *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural theory*. Manchester University Press.
- [2] Bersani, L. (2003). "Pynchon, Paranoia, and Literature," in Thomas Pynchon, Harold Bloom [ed.], Chelsea House Publishers.
- [3] Childs, P. (2000). *Modernism*. Routledge.
- [4] Coale, S. (2019). *Paradigms of Paranoia: The Culture of Conspiracy in Contemporary American Fiction*. University of Alabama Press.
- [5] Culler, J. (2011). *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- [6] Currie, M. (1998). *Postmodern Narrative Theory*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [7] Flieger, V. (1997). *A Question of Time: J.R.R. Tolkien's Road to "Faerie"*. Kent State University Press.
- [8] Habib, M.A.R. (2011). *Literary Criticism: from Plato to the Present, An Introduction*. Wiley Blackwell.
- [9] Hart, E. F. (2017). Embodied Literature: A Cognitive-Poststructuralist Approach to Genre. In J. Rivkin & M. Ryan (Eds.), *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. (3rd ed., p. 1265). Wiley Blackwell. (Original work published 2017)
- [10] Harvey, D. (1989). *The condition of postmodernity*. Wiley Blackwell.
- [11] Hassan, I. (1998). Beyond postmodernism. *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities*, 8(1), 3-11.
- [12] Jarvis, B. (1998). *Postmodern Cartographies*. Pluto Press.
- [13] Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Columbia University Press.
- [14] Lloyd-Smith, A. (2004). *American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction*. Continuum.
- [15] Lyotard, F. (1979). *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester University Press.
- [16] Mandić, J. Ž. (2014). "Fear and Paranoia as a Postmodern Condition in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*." *Филолог-часопис за језик, књижевност и културу*, vol. 10, pp. 143-151.
- [17] McHale, B. (2003). *Postmodernist fiction*. Routledge.
- [18] Parui, A. (2018). *Postmodern Literatures*. Orient Blackswan.
- [19] Pinto, J. (2012). *Em and the big Hoom*. Aleph.
- [20] Rivkin, J. and Ryan, M. (eds). (2017). *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Wiley Blackwell.



David Paul S is currently a Research Scholar in the School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Chennai, India. He is passionate for teaching aspiring to be a professor. His research areas include Postmodern Psychoanalysis and Post-Apocalyptic Literature.



G. Alan is currently working as an Assistant Professor in the School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Chennai, India. He is a highly motivated teacher with ten years of teaching experience. His areas of interest in research are postcolonial and postmodern studies. Currently, he is guiding 4 research scholars. His research articles have been published in reputed journals. Besides critiquing novels from the postcolonial perspective, he has extended his research analysis to postcolonial cinema too. He has a flair for reviewing movies and books.