

Literariness Journal

A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly
Journal of Literature and Cultural
Studies

P-ISSN: 3108-1614
E-ISSN: 3108-172X

LiterarinessJournal.org

Vol. 1, Issue. 3 June 2026

© 2026 by the author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.



A Literariness.org Project

Archiving Em: Care, Counter-Archive and the Mad Mother in Jerry Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom*

ARUNAV DAS

Research Scholar
Department of English
Guahati University, Assam
arunabh348@gmail.com

NEELAKSHI SAMANTA

MA English
Cotton University, Guwahati, Assam
samantaneelakshi@gmail.com

Abstract: Pinto's 2012 novel *Em and the Big Hoom* is primarily a text about a son's attempt to reconstruct his dead mother, a mother who was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and did not fit into the traditional definition of a mother. Pinto constructs a realistic portrait of a lower-middle-class Goan family acting as a tiny caregiving economy to a mad mother. The author does not gloss over the exhaustion, tenderness and ambivalence that come with taking care of a person with mental illnesses. The narrator is building an archive of his mother out of the fragments she has left behind, and the novel questions whether such an archive can define the life that official and medical records could not. This paper attempts to interpret the novel as a counter-archive of mad motherhood thematised through the lens of care. In her book *Moral Boundaries*, Joan Tronto argues that care is essentially a human activity and challenges its traditional association with women and as something that is private and invisible. Using Ann Cvetkovich's "archive of feelings" and Saidiya Hartman's practice of critical fabulation, this paper argues that the narrator's archival labour is itself a continuation of caregiving. Diana Taylor's distinction between the archive and the repertoire further illuminates what the narrator's project cannot reach: Em's embodied presence was repertoire, and after her death the book can only register what it could not hold. This paper tries to illuminate how Pinto's portrayal of Em's illness is inseparable from her gendered role as a mother, wife and sexual being. Pinto provides the readers with an unfiltered picture of Em's sexuality. Furthermore, the paper attempts to make an analysis of how the novel offers a model of the illness narrative as counter-archival practice; one in which writing the mad mother is not closure but unfinished care.

Keywords: *Madness, Motherhood, Care Ethics, Counter-Archive, Archive Studies*

My mother is my poem.

— Agha Shahid Ali, “Lennox Hill”

The figure of the mother has, for the longest time, carried a massive share of literature's moral weight. She is expected to be the still point around which the household turns, the source of unconditional love and even the body whose suffering authorises the narratives of others, most often the narratives of sons. When she falls ill, and especially when she falls mentally ill, this expectation does not loosen but tightens. The mad mother is permitted to exist in literature largely as a problem to be managed, a Gothic shadow, a sacrificial figure whose breakdown clarifies someone else's coming-of-age. What is rarely permitted is her ordinariness: her humour, her appetite, her contradictions, the texture of a life that exceeds both the diagnosis and the role.

This double erasure, by the institution that records her as a case and by the culture that records her as a function, is the problem to which a small but significant body of recent writing has turned its attention. Scholars in care ethics, archive studies, and feminist historiography have, in different vocabularies, asked a shared question: how does one attend to a life that official records have failed to record? Joan Tronto, for instance, has reframed care as a form of distributed and gendered labour rather than a private feminine virtue. In a similar vein, Ann Cvetkovich has argued for an "archive of feelings" assembled from the ephemera that no institution would think to keep. Though developed in completely different contexts, these frameworks share a common refusal to let the documented life stand in for the lived one.

It is into this space that Jerry Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom* (2012) inserts itself. Against these frameworks, the novel reveals itself as something more formally ambitious than its modest surface suggests. It stands as a counter-archive of mad motherhood, assembled by a son who is also his mother's final caregiver, and who understands (though he never quite says so) that the writing of the book is a continuation of the care.

Jerry Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom* (2012) is, at first glance, a novel about a son trying to reconstruct his dead mother. Imelda was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, and the novel that bears her name is built from the fragments she left behind through her letters, diary entries, the circular and contradictory interviews her son conducts with her, and the memories of a family that organised itself almost entirely around her illness. The honesty is specifically what makes the book so unique. Pinto does not soften Em into a tragic figure or render her family's caregiving as mere endurance. He shows the rage, the exhaustion, the casual obscenity, the unsettling intimacy, and the ambivalence, including the narrator's fear that he might one day rejoice at his mother's death. What readers are left with is a portrait of a mad mother who refuses every consolation the genre of the illness narrative usually offers.

The book rebels against the redemptive arc or even the figure of the mother who is loved because she suffered well.

This paper reads the novel as a counter-archive of mad motherhood, thematised through the lens of care. Em's life resists the two records that institutions are built to produce about women like her. First, the medical file that reduces her to a sequence of episodes, and the cultural script of "the mother" that demands self-effacement, which she will not perform. The novel's implicit project, and the narrator's, is to assemble a different kind of record which is capable of holding Em in her contradictions instead of resolving them into a case or a sentiment. To trace how this counter-archive works, the paper draws on three frameworks that, though developed in different contexts, share a common concern with what official records cannot hold. Joan Tronto's *Moral Boundaries* allows us to see the caregiving the novel documents, and the writing the narrator undertakes after Em's death, as labour rather than sentiment, distributed unevenly and rendered invisible by its confinement to the private home. Ann Cvetkovich's "archive of feelings" provides a foundation for the affective material the narrator preserves, including the letters and the interviews, and even the texture of a voice that no clinical record would think to keep. Finally, Saidiya Hartman's practice of critical fabulation describes the imaginative reconstruction the narrator is forced into wherever Em's own traces run out: the years before her illness, the question of when madness began, the life that neither letter nor interview can reach out to.

Together, these frameworks do not stand as three separate readings of the novel but as a single continuous account of what the narrator's aim is. Care does not end at Em's death; it changes medium. The book the narrator writes is itself a final act of caregiving; a final test of whether that caregiving can attend to its object without overwriting her. The argument that follows traces how Pinto holds Em's gendered madness, the family's unequal care economy, and the narrator's archival labour as parts of a single ethical problem: how to write a mad mother in a form honest enough not to complete her.

Motherhood, Madness and the Shape of a Gendered Refusal

Motherhood is often perceived as something that completes a woman. Most portrayals of motherhood in literature are infused with the idea that it is what essentially completes one's existence as a woman. Pinto's novel refuses the completion narrative, or makes visible what idealised portrayals suppress. Throughout the novel, the unnamed narrator (the son) tries to make sense of who his mother Imelda/Em was. Em, who claims to have descended into madness after giving birth to her second child, the narrator: "After you were born, someone turned on a tap. At first it was only a drip, a black drip, and I felt it as sadness" (Pinto 12). Em did not hesitate to show her rage and contempt for motherhood, even in front of her kids. For Em, motherhood is not simply an act of fulfilment; it is a form of dependency

that strips a woman of her selfhood. She asserts, “ Oh God, no. I saw what children do. They turn a good respectable woman into a mudd-dha. I didn’t want to be a mudd-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” (133).

Em’s defiance of traditional motherhood can also be found in her conversations with her kids, both Susan and the narrator. She talks about sex, abortion and masturbation with her children in a very casual tone. There is a lot of stigma and taboo around talking about such topics to one’s children, but that never seemed to have stopped Em, who considered it a part of her maternal duty. Society expects mothers to be self-sacrificing and perfect, but Em is not perfect. She is deeply flawed and, unlike most mothers, her life does not revolve around her children or family; in fact, it is the other way around—the lives of her children and husband revolve around her, who spends most of their time taking care of them. The narrator, Susan, and the Big Hoom have sacrificed their lives, sleep, peace and even their childhoods for her. Even when Em was temporarily hospitalised, the narrator and his family did not know what to do with this brief period of freedom. Pinto writes, “Except that none of the three she left behind know how to go and live; we didn’t know what to do with the brief freedom because it was a tainted freedom.” (147) Em’s madness is a product of the gendered role that society expects her to fulfil as a woman and a mother. Em’s refusal to accept motherhood as an ideology that completes her ultimately questions, then, what this refusal costs and who absorbs this cost. As a result of this refusal, the task of holding the family together automatically falls upon those around her. The author’s use of the phrase “tainted freedom” allows us to see how completely the family is engulfed in the care of Em, that even a temporary release from it feels illegible.

The Mendes Household as an Economy of Attention

In *Moral Boundaries*, Joan Tronto argues that care is not a feminine and private act: it is a form of work distributed, demanded, and often rendered invisible. For Tronto, care is not just a disposition but a practice, a work. Western thought, Tronto points out, has miscategorised care as a predominantly feminine and private emotion, noting that many theorists “do little more than invoke the old forms of ‘women’s morality’” (Tronto 125), when in reality it is a labour. When read using Tronto’s idea of care, the daily life of the Mendes household becomes a labour arrangement with the medication routines and the hospital trips to Ward 33. The narrator and Susan are not simply “loving their mother”, but they are engaging in what Tronto defines as “care-giving, the actual work of care that needs to be done” (Pinto 127). Pinto does not sentimentalise or gloss over the exhaustion that the narrator grapples with; he allows the narrator’s ambivalence to show, illustrating Tronto’s observation of caregivers “engaging in self-sacrifice, and then feeling angry and cheated by these forms of self-deprivation” (Tronto 131). Pinto lets the readers inside the narrator’s mind; the narrator is scared that he might rejoice his

mother's death. The narrator's exhaustion is also evident when he tries to form a support group of people who serve as carers for the mentally ill. In line with Tronto's argument, Pinto then shows us that care, which is often dressed up as natural or filial love, comes with an implicit price; as Tronto warns, "If care is tied to the 'naturalness' of women's caring, then it is either instinctive...and therefore not part of the realm of moral choice" (125).

Tronto is also concerned with how care is unequally allocated, noting that "'[r]esponsibility' has different meanings depending upon one's perceived gender roles, and issues that arise out of class, family status, and culture" (133). In the novel, the task of caregiving primarily falls upon three people—The Big Hoom, the narrator and Susan. According to Tronto, women are made responsible for the daily, intimate and dirty work of care while men are exempted from it; men perform care from a distance by providing, deciding and representing the family outward. Pinto's portrayal of the Big Hoom as the primary caregiver complicates Tronto. The Big Hoom is not a distant or absent caregiver, as he does not delegate the care downwards. He carries the structural load of Em's illness with the financial provision that makes treatment possible at all. He takes responsibility for the hospital admissions, the long-term decisions, and the steadiness the household is built on.

Using The Big Hoom, Pinto then shows us that care can be done by anyone, it's not natural but rather something that is assigned. However, his caregiving is still gendered; it falls under the kind that the patriarchal structure seems to permit. He is not concerned with the continuous, minute-by-minute emotional absorption (the sitting-with, the daily management of mood, the intimate exposure to Em's volatility). That falls more heavily and more constantly on the children. The Big Hoom doesn't refute Tronto, but he specifies her. He shows that the gendering of care isn't only about who is assigned it but about which parts of it they're assigned. The novel, then, denies a one-dimensional reading of care as feminine. The novel itself registers this complication directly, in the narrator's struggle to take the measure of his father:

So how had he managed? How had The Big Hoom grown to the estate of masculinity? Most days I saw him as the perfect man, even in his dense silence that could leave you bleeding for a word in either direction. Then I would correct myself, slowly brutalizing him and so myself and my family. No, he was not a paragon...Perhaps a paragon might have spotted what was wrong with Em before he married her. A paragon would have been more than a mere crisis manager. And a paragon would have expressed his feelings (Pinto 82).

The Big Hoom is both more than an absent patriarch that Tronto warns us against, but he is also less than a full caretaker because he does not cater to the day-to-day or emotional needs as much as the kids. In the narrator's own words, he is but a "mere crisis manager". The novel thus shows us how care can be redistributed by gender without being equalised by it. Only the site of the inequality has changed, from whether a man cares or not, to how he is allowed to care.

If the Big Hoom shows that care can cross gender without escaping its structures, the flat itself shows where Tronto's other major claim lands. Tronto argues that care has been politically quarantined; it has been relegated to the private space, thereby making it invisible. Their one-bedroom flat is functionally a care unit that the state fails to acknowledge. Throughout the novel, hospitals and doctors appear only temporarily and often inadequately. The real and continuous daily care takes place inside the cramped one-bedroom flat, at a place that cannot be seen and therefore cannot be supported. This private act of care feels inescapable, and its absence is disorienting. Tronto also claims that care receiving is a crucial part of the caring process, as it is the only way via which one can know if the caring needs have been fulfilled. However, caregiving in the novel does not end with Em's death, rather it changes form. What was once the work of medication and vigilance, becomes the work of reconstruction after her death. If Tronto allows us to see the Mendes household as an economy of care, she also allows us to see the narrator's writing as its continuation. Care, for Tronto, carries ethical demands; it must be attentive to the object, rather than what is simply convenient for the care giver. When applied to the narrator's archival project, his final act of care, this raises a serious question. An archive is both an act of power and an act of love; it allows one to have the power to decide what is kept and what is forgotten. The narrator, thus, is then Em's final caregiver, and the question the novel continuously asks is whether he is overwriting her in the process.

Preserving the Em the Medical Record Could Not Hold

The narrator never got to know Em as a "whole", he only knows her in parts; in her manic and depressive phases. The novel is a result of the narrator's attempt to build a proper image of his mother from whatever little survives of her—his memories of her, the letters she wrote or even her diary entries. Em was dynamic and unpredictable. The narrator does not confine her to a single version. To confine her to a coherent, explicable figure would mean flattening the very contradictions that shaped her as a person. The medical archive has already been generalised as a case, if the narrator's archive also produces a coherent version of her, then it betrays her too. Tronto's insistence that good care caters to the needs of the care receiver and not the carer creates a problem for the narrator. He is unsure how to assemble a life without subjecting it to the violence of coherence. The novel's restlessness of form,

its refusal to settle into either memoir or biography or case study, is a reflection of the narrator's attempt to keep faith with this demand.

The text also stays unfinished, in a sense, on purpose. Its incompleteness is not a flaw in the caregiving but its most honest expression. The one thing the narrator was sure about was that Em wrote. Em's letters are proof of her literary genius. The narrator often thought that Em's writing was in itself a product of her condition: "This we knew about her even when everything else was a mystery: Em wrote. She wrote when she was with us. She wrote when no one was around" (Pinto 45). As the narrator praises Em's effortless writing skills and wonders why she did not pursue a career in writing, he ends up being consumed with the thought that Em's writing was probably just another manifestation of her mental state: "Or was this writing a manifestation of the condition? It often seemed like it was, the letters growing larger and larger until there was barely a word or two on page. If we cared to, we could have mapped her mania against her font size" (46).

Moreover, the narrator's uncertainty here is itself diagnostic of the archival problem the novel sets him. The medical frame reads Em's writing as a symptom or a manifestation to be mapped against mood, evidence of pathology rather than of personhood. To accept that reading would be to allow the clinical archive to claim even Em's voice as data. To reject it entirely would be to deny the reality of her illness. The narrator does neither. He preserves the writing as writing; as something that survives Em rather than something Em was reduced to, while also leaving the question of its origin unresolved. Tronto allows us to read the narrator's project as an act of attention, but she does not give us a definition for what he is attending to: the residue of a stigmatised life that the official record cannot hold. For that, the paper turns to Ann Cvetkovich.

Cvetkovich's notion of an "archive of feelings" describes exactly the archive that the narrator builds: one assembled not from official documentation but from letters, remembered jokes, the texture of a voice, the ephemera that no institution would think to keep. Saidiya Hartman's practice of critical fabulation, which the paper will turn to in its final movement, describes his method where even that residue runs out. Hartman's theorisation works with the imaginative reconstruction of the parts of Em's life he never witnessed, undertaken with a constant, ethical awareness of its own speculation. Both, importantly, are theories of care as much as theories of the archive. Each is concerned with how one attends to a life that the official record has failed, and each refuses the false comfort of completeness.

Just as Tronto allows us to read the narrator's writing as an act of care, Cvetkovich and Hartman let us see what that care, done well, actually looks like on the page. Ann Cvetkovich's notion of an "archive of feelings" describes precisely the archive the narrator builds, one assembled not from official documentation but from affective residue: letters, remembered jokes, the texture of a voice, the

ephemera that no institution would think to keep. While Saidiya Hartman's practice of critical fabulation describes his method, where even that residue runs out, the imaginative reconstruction of the parts of Em's life he never witnessed, undertaken with a constant, ethical awareness of its own speculation. Both, importantly, are theories of care as much as theories of the archive. Each is concerned with how one attends to a life that the official record has failed, and each refuses the false comfort of completeness.

An archive, in the traditional sense, is a system for keeping evidence. It is essentially documents that verify things that happened. But that system has a built-in bias about what counts as evidence, such as births, deaths, property, diagnoses, and transactions. The things that are dated, official, institutionally generated. Cvetkovich's "archive of feelings" emerges from the practical problem that official documents are not built to hold the feelings that matter the most in life—intimacy, desire, distress, the ordinary texture of feeling. Because the traditional archive cannot structurally hold the things that matter most, Cvetkovich notes that trauma "puts pressure on conventional forms of documentation...[and] demands an unusual archive, whose materials, in pointing to trauma's ephemerality, are themselves frequently ephemeral" (Cvetkovich 7). She contends that it is not just stigmatised or taboo feelings that escape the archive, but also the highly mundane ones, advocating for an approach that recognises "a sense of trauma as connected to the textures of everyday experience" (3-4). The most everyday stuff is just as unarchivable as the most charged stuff. Cvetkovich's theory holds ground because Em lived a life shrouded in stigma and taboo, and is also an ordinary mother whose life her son wants to preserve.

Ephemera is accidental evidence, and that's its strength. It captures what deliberate record-keeping is structurally blind to. Em's letters to Augustine, written during their courtship, are an archive of this kind. The medical file can establish that Em existed and was treated, but only the letters can establish who she was and what she sounded like. What makes the letters a counter-archive, rather than mere sentimental extras, is Cvetkovich's observation that "the memory of trauma is embedded not just in narrative but in material artifacts...invested with emotional, and even sentimental, value" (7-8). The medical or official file narrates Em merely as a sequence of breakdowns; however, the letters show that there was a person who preceded and exceeded them. The narrator's collection of her wit, her appetite for language, and her refusal of decorum create an archive that refuses to let illness become the totalizing frame of her life. By preserving Em's humour and desire, the narrator enacts what Cvetkovich champions: "ways of thinking about trauma that do not pathologize it, that seize control over it from the medical experts" (3). He asserts that Em's stigmatised life was a full life, one that cannot be reduced to clinical pathology. There was courtship, humour and desire. The narrator's

preservation of her letters draws our attention to Em as a whole rather than to the part that the institution found legible.

The interviews the narrator conducts are an active archive, albeit more unstable, just as the letters are an archive left behind by Em. In response to the narrator's questions, Em provides answers that are circular, contradictory and shaped by whatever mood she was in at that point in time. She is unreliable, and according to Cvetkovich, this unreliability is the evidence. An archive of feelings does not promise factual accuracy, but it captures the life as lived by a person. It is provisional, revised and irreducible to a single account. Em is simply being true to her experiences. The interviews are thus accurate, but just to feelings and not to facts. Em's contradictions are not noise obscuring the real Em; they are the form in which she survives. The interviews and letters can only preserve what Em herself supplied. They cannot reach the stretches of her life she could not or would not narrate. Everything the archive of feelings contains in this novel, be it the letters or interviews, all of them have one source—Em. Whatever she didn't put into a letter and didn't tell her son simply isn't in it.

Silence, Repertoire, and the Limits of Preservation

Another kind of loss is also at play here, and it is the one the narrator registers throughout the novel without quite being able to name it. Daina Taylor's distinction between the archive and the repertoire is particularly useful here. Taylor defines the archive as what can be recorded and is durable. It is texts, documents, the kind of things that survive the test of time, while the repertoire, for her, is embodied through gestures, voice, movements, the kind of knowledge that can only be carried by the living body. The two are, however, not opposed, but they hold different things; what one cannot preserve, the other can. Em's letters and her interviews, then, enter the archive. Em, as she actually was in the flat, her laugh, her smoking, the unmistakable cadence of her speech, make up the repertoire. This is the Em that the narrator knew but failed to preserve. The book is the most he can do, and even then, he is painfully aware of how it is so much less than the Em he knew. This loss is structurally different from the silences that the narrator imaginatively reconstructs, as it is not the loss of what has never been narrated but of what cannot be archived at all.

For those silences, preservation is not enough; the narrator is forced into imaginative reconstruction, and it is here that Hartman's critical fabulation is of use.

Saidiya Hartman, in her essay "Venus in Two Acts" developed the concept of critical fabulation in the context of the slave archive. She argues that the slave archive has reduced lives to mere numbers, transactions, and losses, questioning how a writer can "recuperate lives entangled with and impossible to differentiate from...the account books that identified them as units of value, the invoices

that claimed them as property" (Hartman 4). She asks what a writer is to do when the archive simply stops, wondering, "And how does one tell impossible stories?" (11). The narrator in his archival project deals with a similar issue, and Hartman's unique answer is precisely what the narrator does. She suggests that one should neither accept the silence as final nor fill it with confident invention. Instead, critical fabulation works in the space between; it functions as "an impossible writing which attempts to say that which resists being said...a narrative of what might have been or could have been; it is a history written with and against the archive" (12). Hartman's approach is built on a tension it never resolves: the writer must imagine in order to do justice to the silenced life, while simultaneously admitting that the imagining is not the life itself. She defines this double gesture as "straining against the limits of the archive...and, at the same time, enacting the impossibility of representing the lives... precisely through the process of narration" (11). For the narrator of the novel, this is the discipline his mother's silences require. To honour Em's undocumented years, the narrator must fill in the gaps using his imagination, while practising a "narrative restraint" (12) that constantly acknowledges his invention can never truly replace Em's lived experiences.

The clearest site of this critical fabulation in the novel is the life of Imelda before she became their Em, the young woman the narrator never got to know and could only assemble. The letters give him her courtship voice and the interviews give him her own retrospective fragments. However, between and beneath these lies a life he must imagine. The life Em lived as a teacher, a typist, a daughter and the woman before illness organised everything around itself, are aspects of her life that the narrator cannot reach, but can only assemble. The narrator's recurring, unanswerable question regarding when and how Em's madness begins is what critical fabulation is built around. The narrator himself calls it his obsession to figure out what turned Em into the person that he knows. Did it really begin after his birth, as Em says, or was it something else altogether? Was it a result of something that happened in her childhood? Was there ever a clean "before" at all? The novel refuses to fix an answer, and this refusal is a method. To name a single origin would be to fabricate a coherence the evidence does not support; to do so would be invention masquerading as fact, which is what Hartman warns against. By holding the question open, the narrator reconstructs his mother's earlier life while keeping visible the seam where reconstruction begins: "But each time Em told me something about her life, I would examine it for signs, for early indications of the 'nervous breakdown'. It was an obsession and might have something to do with my curiosity about her life" (Pinto 32).

This becomes critical fabulation rather than simply novelistic licence because of the narrator's persistent refusal to let his imagining settle into authority. He speculates, but he flags the speculation; he offers versions, but marks them as versions; he returns, again and again, to Em's own words, letting her contradict and interrupt the account he is building. The hybridity of the book's form, which is part

memoir, part biography, part transcript and part novel, is the signature of this restraint. It is a structure that cannot be mistaken for a stable biographical record, and that refusal of stability is ethical before it is aesthetic. Hartman's method demands that the writer hold power over the silenced subject and decline to use it to produce false closure. The narrator's whole procedure is tentative, self-correcting, and deferring to Em wherever her voice survives, and by doing so, the narrator is declining to produce false closure.

Critical fabulation, then, is not a departure from the caregiving argument but its furthest extension. To reconstruct Imelda's lost years without flattening them, to imagine responsibly rather than to explain away, is to attend to Em exactly as good care attends to its object and without imposing a coherence that serves the carer's need for resolution more than the cared-for's reality. If Cvetkovich lets the narrator preserve the Em who left traces, Hartman lets him reach, carefully, the Em who did not. Both methodologies merge into a single archival practice—one that holds the documented and the undocumented life in the same unfinished form. And it must remain unfinished. The novel's resistance to closure, then, is a deliberate choice. It is the final form the narrator's care takes as an archive that respects its subject by declining the false authority of a finished portrait.

Writing as Ongoing Care

Em and the Big Hoom offers, in the end, a practice—a way of attending to a life that the official record has failed. Across Tronto, Cvetkovich and Hartman, the novel reveals an ethics of care that extends beyond the bedside and the hospital corridor into the act of writing itself. The Mendes household is an unsupported care unit folded into a one-bedroom flat, and its labour falls unevenly along lines that the figure of the Big Hoom both interrupts and confirms: care can be done by anyone, but the patriarchal structure still decides which parts of it fall on whom, and who is permitted an outside. Em's letters and her contradictory interviews form an affective archive that the medical file cannot supply. It preserves the young woman Imelda was and the older woman she remained beneath the diagnosis. And where even that archive runs out, in the silences of a life she could not or would not narrate, the narrator turns to imaginative reconstruction, but reconstruction marked as such, never allowed to harden into recovered fact.

The achievement of the novel, and the wager of the narrator's project, is that these are not separate operations. They are the same work in different forms; the work of caring for someone whose life and death exceed the records made about her. The book's hybridity of form, its refusal to settle into memoir or biography or case study, is an exposition of that care. It is also the example of a translation that cannot be completed; it is what Diana Taylor would call the attempt to convert repertoire into archive, knowing in advance that something of Em will not survive the conversion. The novel does not

pretend otherwise. Its restlessness is, in part, the trace of what it could not hold. To produce a coherent Em would have been to perform the same violence the medical archive already performs.

Em and the Big Hoom can thus, rightly, be called a counter-archive of mad motherhood. It is a record that holds the documented and the undocumented life in the same unresolved form. Such a record cannot be finished, and it should not be. Em survives in the novel only because the novel will not complete her, and because the narrator continues to care for his mother by refusing the closure that would, finally, lay her to rest. The illness narrative, in this light, becomes a form of ongoing care. It is an archive kept open, a daughter and son and husband who never quite learn how to live without her, and a book whose last word is not resolution but attention.

Bibliography

- Cvetkovich, Ann. *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Duke University Press, 2003.
- Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe*, vol. 12, no. 2, June 2008, pp. 1–14. *Duke University Press*, <https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-1>.
- Mallavarapu, Srikanth. "Resistance, Suffering, and Psychiatric Disability in Jerry Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom* and Amandeep Sandhu's *Sepia Leaves*." *Literatures of Madness: Disability Studies and Mental Health*, edited by Elizabeth J. Donaldson, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 181–197.
- Pinto, Jerry. *Em and the Big Hoom*. Aleph Book Company, 2012.
- Sahay, Snehal, and Ranjit Kumar. "Reading Motherhood, Postpartum Depression, and Patriarchy in Jerry Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom*." *Literature & Aesthetics*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2024. *Sydney Open Journals*, <https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/LA/article/view/19493>.
- Singh, Neha, et al. "Mother's Maladies: Understanding the Intricacies of Postpartum Psychosis and Motherhood through Jerry Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom*." *Medical Humanities*, 11 May 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1136/medhum-2024-013183>.
- Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Duke University Press, 2003.
- Tiwari, Nimisha, and Aratrika Das. "Patient's Consent and Autonomy in Jerry Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom*." *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, vol. 15, no. 4, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v15n4.18>.
- Tronto, Joan C. *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*. Routledge, 1993.