

EDITORS  
NOTE

Greek philosopher Heraclitus once said: "There is nothing permanent except change." We can try to resist it all we want, but change is inevitable. In today's SLR, Shahpar Selim contemplates on the dynamics of a family when a core member goes through changes that are out of her control. Nirupama Subramanian shares her thoughts as she changes cities to set up home in Dhaka. And Farah Ghuznavi opines on whether or not academic classes can change a person's creative output. We hope you will find them to be interesting perspectives on inevitability.

## THE TEXTURES OF US

Shahpar Selim

It's very rare that you come across a book that moves you too much. Now that's a loaded sentence, you might say, and you might wonder what is 'too much', and you might question if that makes it a good book. Well, a bad book can also move you (into never ever reading that author again) but a when a good book moves you – ah, that is a beautiful thing. In a world full of vapid

posturing blogs and vanity first novels, not much moves me these days, but this one book has – Jerry Pinto's *Em And The Big Hoom*. If you've never heard of it in Dhaka, I don't blame you, as it's not readily available here; and if you are skeptical of what I say since Pinto isn't exactly a Seth or a Ghosh or even a Bhagat, who can blame you? But believe Kiran Desai when she says that this book drowned her. Once you've read it, you'll know what she means.

The book tells many stories all at once.

It is a story narrated by an unnamed boy who is translating his life for us as though he has no other choice but to try desperately to understand his own mother's illness, and through that, trying to understand his own place in life.

This unnamed boy is me; this unnamed boy is anybody who reads this book. He is anybody who has tried to make sense of what it is like to realize at a young age that relationships are actually made of very thin wires and that when those wires catch fire, you must be able to carry it through, no matter how burnt your young fingers might get.

This novel is the story of carrying things through. A book means something to you personally when it explains something that you didn't understand before; when it presents a new way of looking at something; when it takes the ordinary and magnifies it to show the little extraordinary elements that have gone into making it a whole. A novel means something to you when it teaches you something. *Em and the Big Hoom* is all of these things.

This novel teaches you and changes you. It tells the story of a family that is trying to be a family, around a mother who, instead of being what we typically expect of mothers in a family story, is a manic-depressive and by the nature of her illness is consumed by it emotionally and physically. She is not the mother that comes home from the office, checks your homework, scolds

you for not eating your vegetables and sits down with your father about this month's expenses. She is the mother who smokes beedis and has rather inappropriate conversations with her children as a way to cope and understand what is going on with her. She talks at length about her own childhood, her short lived secretarial job, her first flush romance with the man she eventually married and had two children with – Susan the elder sister and the unnamed narrator.

She willfully shocks her family by the things she says and plays out her own insecurities as a woman, wife and mother, because she knows in her heart

world, and everybody else in it is secondary. Her illness is the sun and her family orbits around it.

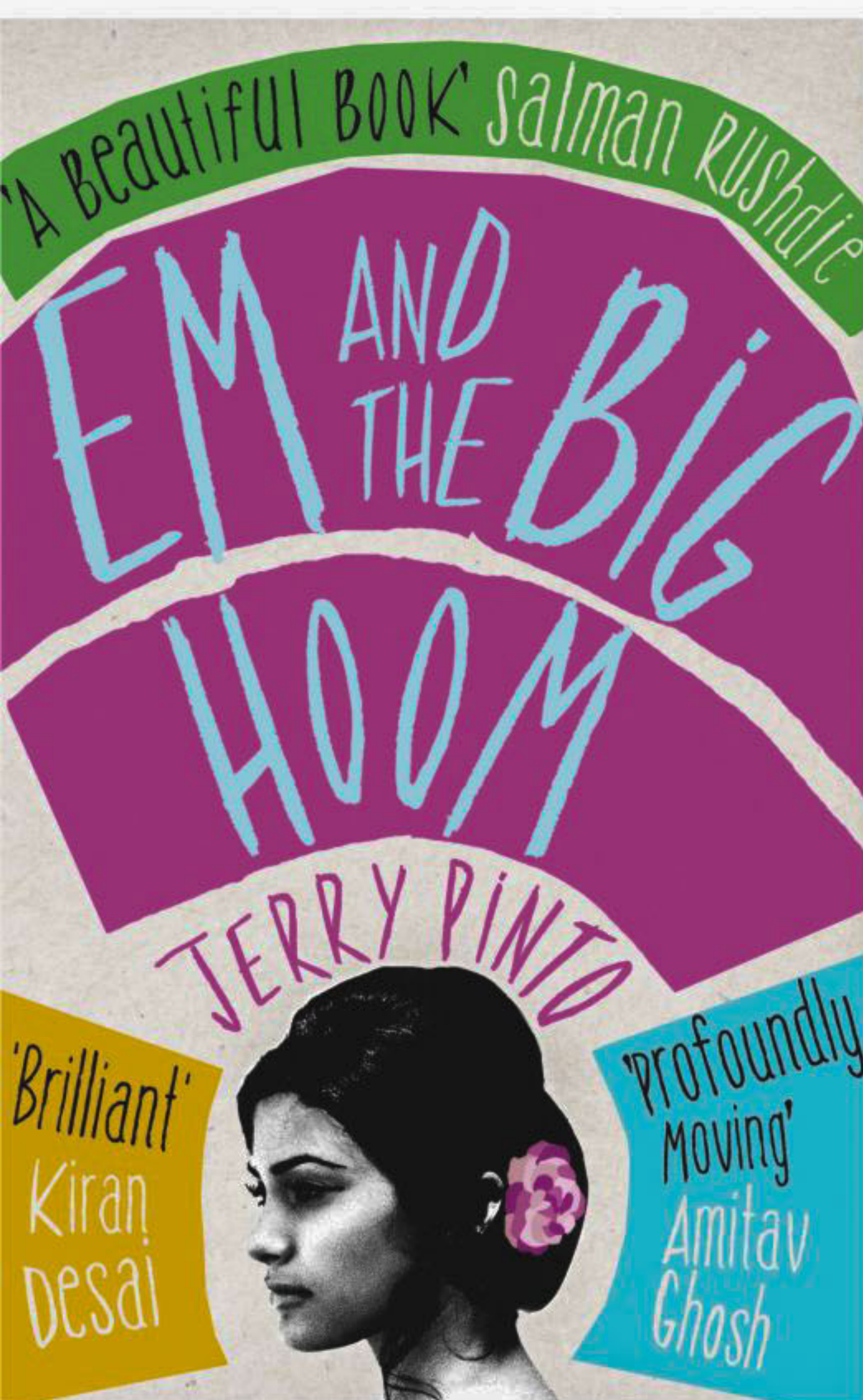
The family barely functions outside the framework of Em's illness. The children have no "normal" pursuits, no normal romantic or social lives as they grow up into adulthood. They exist in between their mother's words and fits. During one of Em's bouts, she tells her son that she thinks she was fine until he was born, and that while she loved his sister Susan, the blackness of depression slowly started to creep in after she had given birth to her second child. A growing adolescent boy grows up even faster in those few sentences as

all over the bathroom floor. Nobody helps them clean up the wounds inside their souls caused by the lashings of Em's demons.

Em tries to commit suicide three times, to let the darkness out by opening up her body to the world, even though she did not once want her children to see her die like that. She had no choice but to try to escape what was killing her inside her mind, because she could no longer answer the things that her mind was asking of her. This is the nature of Em's manic depression.

We live in a society that never talks about depression, and this book is such a relief from the bottling up. We need to talk about it. We need to understand it better so as to know how to handle it better. We need to know what it might be like to feel the darkness slowly swelling up within the mind; feeling helpless within its grip, letting the body shut down and shrink while the mind expands, running free with its own paranoiac demons. Mental illness is hard enough to even talk about and you really don't know what it's like unless you've suffered from it. This book teaches you what somebody's darkness might be like for them.

Em isn't the perfect mother, and there is no prescription in this novel about what the perfect family is supposed to be like either. The easiest thing to do as the reader would be to blame the family, but you come away without judgment of their flaws. That's the power of a truly great novel – it shows you the insides of us clearly, with our vulnerabilities and strains laid bare. There is no prescription, there is no judgment. Just like real life, but magnified and revealed. Like the narrator, trying to make sense of his life, searching for clues that give him some way out of the mess that is his life – it occurred to me several times in the book that he could be any one of us, searching for a vocabulary to explain our own lives to ourselves. How can



that her illness has removed her from what she perhaps could have been – if only she weren't depressed – if only she had been "normal". Almost as though on a dare with her illness, she hits out at her husband the most, keeps on challenging him to react, knowing full well that he wouldn't; totally oblivious to the effects this might have on him, or on their marriage. Everything else, all other relationships and all other expectations are distractions to the main event which is her own suffering. She becomes so preoccupied by what her mind is telling her that all her attention is on her illness. That is her

his mother's words tear a hole inside him that he never quite manages to sew shut. These conversations don't stop, and the narrator is filled with dread wondering what his mother's words might mean. He wonders if there are clues within the things she says that might signal another attempt to kill herself, and he is afraid of hurting her with his words. He wants to hear, but he doesn't want to hear.

They are always cleaning up after her physically and emotionally. In one scene the boy is cleaning up after one of Em's suicide attempts and is struggling to wash away the blood clots

## Q&amp;A WITH FARAH GHUZNAVI

## The Writer's Wilderness Survival Kit

QIN: Is it necessary to study creative writing in order to be a writer?  
ANS: That's a good question – and one that significantly divides the literary world! I should state, in the interests of full disclosure, that I have never attended a creative writing course myself. As a writer, I am almost entirely self-taught. I can't even claim to have a degree in English Literature. But I have been a voracious reader all my life, and sometimes an indiscriminate one. Growing up in Dhaka when I did, books in English were few and far between, so I read whatever I could get my hands on. That was very effective in teaching me what I didn't like, as well as introducing me to books that have lived within me long after I finished reading them.

Apart from reading, my greatest opportunities for learning how to write better have come about through discussions with fellow writers, and by analysing the critiques of my work that I have received from others. No doubt a creative writing course – especially if taught by someone like the poet Christopher Merrill or the writer Philip Hensher – would provide further learning opportunities.

Some argue that creative writing courses are just part of an industry that allows everyone to think that they can write. I would agree that everyone can write. I am just not sure that everyone can write well. In every field of creative endeavour, we see individuals with a degree of inborn talent. Writing is no different. If, for example, writing or painting watercolours brings you pleasure, I believe you should do it. You don't have to be J.M. Turner to produce pretty watercolours. On the other hand, simply being a watercolour artist doesn't mean that one is a Turner either!

There are those who believe that writing courses lead to formulaic writing, and encourage mediocrity. The legendary Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe was dismissive on the subject, claiming that while he could not say much about the value of the writing courses for students, they did provide a means for writers to make a living by teaching! Award-winning Indian author Janice Pariat has also expressed a number of concerns about such courses, not least that "Ultimately...what creative writing courses threaten is the very existence of writing as a craft, branding it instead as a 'skill' that can be bought, sold and certified."

Personally, I think that what a writer can get out of studying creative writing depends a great deal on both the inherent talent of the writer concerned and who the course is taught by. For someone genuinely gifted, the right course could help them develop their skills faster. But life – and the trial and error method – has its own lessons to offer. Before creative writing courses emerged, there was certainly no dearth of great literature. And that makes me believe that for someone who is genuinely set on becoming a writer, completing a creative writing course is neither a sufficient nor a necessary precondition to achieving that goal.



## DHAKA: The First Few Days

Nirupama Subramanian

Dhaka, from the plane, looked like a patchwork quilt of green and white with faint dark lines running through the fabric. We alighted from the plane with a sense of trepidation and excitement. Dhaka International airport had none of the shining abundance of shops and duty free outlets of other airports across the world. It was quieter, rather self-effacing and rather easy to navigate. The Immigration officer waved my family over with a smile and I entered the city of Dhaka.

I realised, with a pang, that this was no vacation. We were leaving India for the first time, to live in another country. I have travelled overseas extensively and have lived across different cities in India but creating a home in a new country was something quite different. If anyone had told me six months ago, that I would be living in Dhaka, I would have scoffed. Yet, there I was driving through city that is to be my home for the next few years. As the main road from the airport gave way to narrow streets that swelled in noise and bustle, I slowly took in my surroundings.

"It is not like Gurgaon at all," sighed

my daughter, an ardent devotee of the concrete and glass buildings and malls of our previous home. Dhaka was like an older city, flatter, greener with alternating spaces of noise and silence. When faced with a strange new experience, we comfort ourselves by looking for the familiar.

In the three weeks that I have been here, I have found much that seems comforting. There was even a certain sense of home – in the beggars who ran up to our car, the hawkers peddling pirated English bestsellers at the traffic signals, in the warm brown faces of the people who thronged the narrow roads, the anarchic chaos of the traffic that magically gave way to a certain order. The quiet inner streets of Gulshan and Baridhara, the small roadside kiosks selling bead and bananas, the curving coconut trees and the warm moist breeze, are all redolent of another time, another place. Dhaka reminds me of Chennai, my home town, a place I associate with my adolescent years, with growing up and finding my roots.

Yet, this alternates with the new, the unexpected – the colourful shining rickshaws that deftly weave in through

the crush of cars, the bill boards in a new language, a sudden splash of gulmohar flowers and roads that are known by numbers instead of names. The unfamiliar currency in my purse, a language which I can only comprehend partially, the undecipherable number plates on cars, the friendly greetings of 'Salaam Aleikum' – these tell me that I am in a new land. Even as I am disturbed by the constant churning of car and people, shocked by the steep prices at supermarkets, I am also pleasantly surprised by the promptness and friendliness of service providers and the easy availability of most of my daily needs.

Dhaka, with its unique blend of the familiar and strange, is a place to explore. I have seen only a small part of this city. I look forward to new experiences and new friends. I will take it as it comes and hope for the thrill of discovery, for serendipity in unlikely places.

Nirupama Subramanian is the author of 'Intermission' and 'Keep The Change'. This article was first printed in the Varta newsletter.