



**BOOK REVIEW OF *FAMILY LIFE*
WRITTEN BY AKHIL SHARMA**

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PRONOUNCEMENT

The writer states truthfully that this project is compiled by her without taking any results from other research in any university, in S-1, S-2, S-3 degree and diploma. In addition, the writer ascertains that she does not take material from other publications or someone's work except for the references mentioned in references.

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MOTTO AND DEDICATION

“To see the world, things dangerous to come to, to see behind walls,
draw closer, to find each other, and to feel. That is the purpose of life.”

(Walter Mitty)

This final project is dedicated to the writer's parents, family, and friends

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Semarang, August 2016

The writer

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1. INTRODUCTION

Family Life is the 2nd semi-autobiographical novel by Akhil Sharma, an award-winning Indian-American author. This novel was published in 2014 and had gone into New York Times best books list. *Family Life* tells about an Indian family that came to America in the late 1970s as part of the first large wave of Indian immigration to the U.S. and, two years later, suffered a terrible tragedy. The family has two children; two boys, ten and fourteen. The older boy dives into a pool and strikes his head on the bottom of the floor. After the accident, he has suffered severe brain damage: he can no longer walk or talk; he can't move in his sleep; he has to be fed through a tube. After the brain-damaged boy spends a year in a hospital and a year in nursing home, the family decides to take him home and take care of him themselves. This causes the family to breakdown.

The writer has chosen this novel *Family Life* because it has a moving story about immigrant family's response to tragedy. Sharma provides an interesting insight about how each member of the family copes with misery following the tragic accident. The Indian family, coming to America in search for opportunity for the two children, has to face the loneliness and despair in new land after their dreams turn sour.

Sharma is the author of the 2000 novel, *An Obedient Father*, for which he won the 2001 PEN/Hemingway Award and the 2001 Whiting Writers' Award (Hoover, 2010). His second novel, *Family Life*, which was published in 2014, was written based largely on his own family experiences as an immigrant living in America. He has also published stories in *The New Yorker*, *Atlantic Monthly*,

Quarterly, Fiction, and O. Henry Award Winners (anthology) (Hamid, 2014). His short story “Cosmopolitan,” anthologized in *The Best American Short Stories* 1998, was also made into an acclaimed 2003 film of the same name, which has appeared on PBS series *Independent Lens*.

The purpose of this project is to make a review of *Family Life* written by discussing the strengths and the weaknesses of the novel through its intrinsic elements, such as theme, character, and setting.

2. SUMMARY OF *FAMILY LIFE*

The story begins with the Mishras, a young, middle-class family living in Delhi in the mid-1970s. At that time, India is under emergency rule, a time of difficulty and uncertainty, but for 8-year old Ajay and his older brother Birju, life is playful and secure. Their mother fills their world, while their father seems so excessive that Ajay wonders if he’s been assigned to them by the government. One day, Mr. Mishra decides the family should immigrate to the United States because he loves Western science so much that he often gets his urine tested.

Upon arrival, the Mishras settle in one bedroom apartment in Queens and begin to form a new life. Life is exciting at first, Mr. Mishra offers his sons 50 cents for every library book they read; for doing so, Ajay wonders if his father has turned too American. When his mother wears a pair of jeans for the first time, Birju teases her. And soon Birju manages to pass the exams for the Bronx High School of Science. The family opens the school’s acceptance letter at the temple, on their knees before an idol of Hindu god Ram. But in an instant, this life ends. Birju has an accident at a swimming pool and suffers a fatal brain damage. When

the 10-year-old Ajay first learns of the accident, he nonchalantly speculates that if Birju were dead he would get to be the only son.

Medicine and science do little for Birju. He is blind and will not walk or talk again. Years pass and Birju's condition remains unchanged. He lies in a bed at home, stiff and breathless. Ajay prays for countless hours with his parents for his brother's recovery and feels guilty as he sneaks in a prayer to do well on his math test. His father becomes alcoholic. His mother is busy by her efforts to "wake" Birju. His parents begin to fight viciously. They begin to forget Ajay and his need for nurture. One cheerless Christmas Day, Ajay erupts, sobbing to his parents that he too deserves something, for enduring the condition — at least some pizza. "I am so sad," Ajay confesses to his father one evening. "You're sad?" his father responds; I want to hang myself everyday."

Ajay continues his life through this wreckage. He gets top grades at school. At ninth grade, he scores perfect As. At home he bathes his brother. Later, he begins to understand the difference between his life and his brother's life. He talks to God about his pain at being the only one to receive his family's luck. Once completing High School, Ajay got accepted into Princeton after his first attempt entering Brown University failed. Ajay knows that Princeton will make him away from home. Sometimes he comes home to his parents on weekend, and works all Saturday night. After Ajay graduates, he becomes an investment banker and makes seven hundred thousand dollars in his first year as a vice president.

3. REVIEW OF *FAMILY LIFE*

3.1. The Strengths of the Novel

3.1.1. Theme

After reading *Family Life*, the writer finds some interesting points such as theme, character, and setting. The first strength of this novel is the theme. A story without theme will be vague and unclear. There are themes of family relationship, grief, love, and loss. In this novel, the writer describes there are some unexpected situations in life. *Family Life* talks mainly about how an immigrant family responds to loss after tragic tragedy from the point of view of Ajay. Over the course of the novel, the readers will meet the family's various feeling of grief. Ajay, the family's younger son, is described as the one who suffers the most. The quotation below shows Ajay's grief after suddenly leaving his homeland for America in which he thinks nothing is like home.

“On Diwali, it was odd to go to school, odd and painful to stand outside the brown brick building waiting for its door to open. In India, everything would be closed for the festival ... All of us children would be home dressed in a good clothes. Now in America, standing on the sidewalk I imagine India, with everyone home for the new year. At that moment I felt like the life I was living in America was not important, that no matter how rich America was, how wonderful it was to have cartoons on TV, only life in India mattered.” (Sharma, 2014:35).

It can be seen that Ajay laments about his new life in America. He misses India so much that it pains him. No matter how exciting America is, nothing can replace home. He misses being on the festive joy, for he recalls about he will be dressed in good clothes and coming back home for new year with joy. Even though the wonderful America has so much to offer, little Ajay thinks only life in India matters.

Ajay's grieving over the absence of Delhi at only eight years old is unending. As an outsider in America, to deal with horrific confusion and change, in many ways, upset him. He senses an alienation toward his surroundings. At school, he feels the strangeness being around new people. "It was strange to be among so many whites. They all looked alike. When a boy came up to me between periods and asked a question, it took me a moment to realize I had spoken to him before" (Sharma, 2014:34-35). As an Indian, Ajay's distinct physical appearance makes him the object of bully. The following quotation shows Ajay's confession about the mistreatment.

"I was often bullied. Sometimes a little boy would come up to me and tell me that I smelled bad. Then, if I said anything, a bigger boy would appear so suddenly that I couldn't tell where he had come from. He would knock me down. He'd stand over me, fists clenched, and demand, "You want to fight? You want to fight?" Sometimes boys surrounded me and shoved me back and forth, keeping me upright as a kind of game. Often, standing in a corner of the asphalt yard, I would think, *There has been a mistake. I am not the sort of boy who is pushed around. I am good at cricket, I am good at marbles.*" (Sharma, 2014:35)

From the quotation above, it can be seen that he often bullied. And the fact that he often bullied, saddens him. One morning, he cries as he tells his brother about the bullying. Feeling sorry for his little brother, Birju suggests him to talk to the teacher about the problem, but Ajay unwilling to do it. Instead, Birju speaks to their parents on behalf of his brother. The following day, Ajay comes to school with his father and the bullying eventually stops. Ajay has not thought that what Birju suggested would make a difference.

After the tragic accident hits his older brother, the whole family is drowning in grief. Ajay parents' grief over the accident has in turn affected him. He is somehow being neglected by his parents. For having to spend so much time

in the hospital and for having to move to a town he doesn't know, on one gloomy Christmas day, Ajay explodes. He is crying to his father that he is sad and demands care. But his father responds with anger.

The tragic accident has turned Mr. Mishra into an alcoholic. He is depressed and devastated by the fact that his son will never be able to talk or walk again. When things are getting worse, Mr. Mishra and his wife begin to have a violent quarrel. Mr. Mishra drinks so much he risks being fired from his job as a government clerk, while Mrs. Mishra throws her disappointment at her second son. "If Birju were all right, I would tell you to get out. I'd tell you to leave right now," she says. "Go with your stupid grades and die." While giving up hope on hospitals and medications, Mrs. Mishra becomes obsessed by her efforts to "wake" her brain-damaged son. She employs various miracle workers hoping that Birju will recover.

Even though much of the novel is caught up in despair and grief, Sharma also creates powerfully moving moments of love. While bathing Birju, Ajay and his mother jokingly call Birju silly names and tease him, trying to forget about his disabilities. One night, Ajay even sleeps next to his brother and confides in him his insecurities and worries. *Family Life* emphasizes the value of family, which makes the novel powerful. It displays Ajay's success in school and later on in life in order to emphasize the idea that the fulfillment of the American dream cannot bring back the suffering past of Ajay's family.

3.1.2. Characters

Characters are important in a literary works as they are the foundation of the story.

Character is divided into two which are flat character and round character. Akhil Sharma gives a strong overview of the characters in the story, including description of personality. In *Family Life*, the round character is represented by Ajay Mishra and the flat character is represented by Birju Mishra.

Ajay Mishra is the main character in this novel and is the round character. This character plays an important role because the story will tell the readers all of his life. Ajay is the family's younger son and somehow neglected by his parents after his older brother's tragic accident. In the beginning of the narrative, Ajay is described as an ignorant, selfish child. In the novel, Ajay confesses the moment of self-centeredness during his childhood. When his family decides to move to America and Ajay is forced to give away his toys, he haughtily states, "The boy's hand struck my palm. As soon as it did, I wanted my car back" (Sharma, 2014:29). There is a moment that shows Ajay's ignorance when tragedy strikes his family in America.

"I started on my way back. I walked head down along the sidewalk. I was irritated. Birju had gotten into the Bonx High School of Science, and now he was going to get to be in a hospital. I was get to be in a hospital. I was certain our mother would feel bad for him and give him a gift. As I walked, I wondered whether Birju had stepped in a nail. I wondered if he was dead. This last was thrilling. If he was dead, I would get to be the only son." (Sharma, 2014:50)

The quotation above shows Ajay's lack of empathy for his older brother. When Birju is left brain-damaged after he hits his head while diving at the local swimming pool, the accident devastated the family. Yet, Ajay initially thinks to himself how great it would be to be the only child.

As a round character, Ajay's personality tends to be dynamic. In the beginning, Ajay depicted as an insolent, selfish kid. But later on in the novel, Ajay's character shows significant change. Sharma describes Ajay's maturation through his developing passion for reading, which in turn creates in him a love of writing.

"I was always lost in a book, whether I was actually reading or imagining myself as a character. If bad things happened, like Birju developing pneumonia and having to wear oxygen mask, I would think that soon I would be able to go back to my reading and then time would vanish and when I entered the world, the difficult thing would be gone or changed." (Sharma, 2014:150)

Ajay too, feels the destruction that the accident has caused in the family, and he becomes a more independent young man. At home, in order to avoid his parents' fights and his father's hopelessness and alcoholism, Ajay turns to the world of literature and books.

"As I kept reading Hemingway, who seemed to so value suffering in silence, I began to see my family's pain as belonging in a story ... At the idea of writing sentences that contained our suffering, I experienced both of the triumph ... and also a sort of detachment, like I was watching my own life." (Sharma, 2014: 157)

Ajay becomes particularly interested in the life of Ernest Hemingway; as he loses himself in Hemingway's adventurous experiences, he finds his passion for reading and writing and begins to write short stories mimicking Hemingway's simple style.

“I began my story in the middle of the action the way Hemingway did. I wrote: *The coughing wakes me. My wife coughs and coughs, and then when her throat is clear, she moans. The nurse’s aide moves back and forth downstairs. The hospital’s bed jingles.*” (Sharma, 2014: 158-159)

Sharma used depiction of character’s feeling to write about Ajay’s growing interest in writing that in turn helps paint his gradual character growth. In *Family Life*, Ajay points out his feeling about how reading books made him feel transformed.

“Reading these books I had the feeling that I was being transformed. I felt like I was being connected to a world where stories were written and where they were studied. Feeling myself being connected, I had the sense that I was being taken away from my own life and brought into a world that was glamorous.” (Sharma. 2014:155)

Sharma gives well description with Ajay’s character in coping with misery. In *Family Life*, although Ajay’s parents too immersed in their own grief, fail to notice Ajay’s growing maturity, Ajay uses his passion for writing to cope with misery brought by Birju’s accident, which is interesting.

Birju characterization in *Family Life* also makes the novel interesting. Sharma writes Birju’s character in regards of his own brother, Anup Sharma, who in real life suffers brain-damage which caused him disabled for the rest of his life. Birju is the family’s eldest son. He is described as smart, clever, and by far proving the most successful. For that reason, his parents seem to favour him more than his younger brother, Ajay. According to Ajay, Birju suddenly becomes popular in America. The quotation below shows how Ajay describes Birju.

“Birju liked America much more than I did. In India he had not been popular. Here he made friends quickly. He was in seventh grade and his English was better than mine. Also he was kinder than he used to be in India.” (Sharma, 2014:38)

Birju's cleverness is proven when he wins a place at the prestigious Bronx High School of Science. Birju is a hardworking student. It can be seen by him studying hard long before he took the exams.

“.....In Arlington Birju began studying for the test to get into the Bronx High School of Science. He had to study five hours a day. While I got to go out, Birju had to stay in the living room and work until he was done with his hours ... When we returned to Queens, Birju had to study three hours every weeknight and all day on weekends.” (Sharma, 2014:42)

Birju is the flat character in this novel. Flat character usually has only one personality and is not affected by circumstances. Flat character tends to be static. For Birju, it is ironic that he is destroyed by tragic accident. During a summer swimming, he suffers severe brain damage after being knocked unconscious under water. Change in personality is perhaps not the right word for Birju. Birju, lying in a bed, stiff and breathless, and in need of 24-hour care, he becomes static personified. The quotation below shows Birju's condition after the tragic accident.

“.....Birju moaned, he yawned, he coughed, but even with his eyes open he appeared to be dreaming. Birju responded to things. If there was a loud noise, he turned his head in the direction of the sound. Then he rolled his head back and just lay there. Often he smacked his lips and puffed spit. Occasionally he had a seizure. His teeth would clamp shut and squeak against each other. His body would stiffen, his waist rise off the bed, and the bed would begin to rattle.” (Sharma, 2014:56)

3.1.3. Setting

The setting of *Family Life* gives vivid description to characters. Sharma mentions some settings and he does give clear information about each setting. For example, there is description about the place, time, and condition back when the family was living in India. It can be seen from the quotations below.

“It is important to remember that the sixties and seventies were the era of the Green revolution. ... Because of the Green revolution there was no fodder in the summer and so people who would have died were now saved. All over Delhi, Mother Dairy was putting up its cement kiosks with the blue drop on the side.” (Sharma, 2014:14)

“.....Then came the emergency. After Indira Gandhi suspended the constitution and put thousands of people in jail, my parents, like nearly everyone, lost faith in the government.” (Sharma, 2014:15)

From the quotation above, it can be seen that the family was living in Delhi in the sixties until late seventies before they leave for America. India was under emergency rule at that time. Many people lost faith in the government that after the emergency they begin to feel that it may still be better to leave the country. Around these times were also the times of Green Revolution, when the world seems to value science the most, no exception, in India.

Delhi of the seventies, where the family lived, was a quiet place with “street empty of traffic, children playing cricket in the middle of the street” (Sharma, 2014:15). Ajay and his brother Birju used to play cricket in the streets, waiting for the day when their plane tickets that will bring them to America will arrive.

Another notable setting is Queens, New York. Queens is the place where the family settles for the first time upon their arrival in America. Unlike in India, here the family have to live in one-bedroom apartment. The following quotation

describes the physical attribute of the apartment.

“The apartment my father had rented had one bedroom. It was in a tall, brown brick-building in Queens. The apartment’s gray metal front door swung open into a foyer with a wooden floor. Beyond this was a living room with a reddish brown carpet that went from wall to wall.” (Sharma, 2014: 30)

There is a distinct description about Queens. According to Ajay, Queens is “a port for Indian”. Having rarely seen many Indians at that time, the quotation below is what Ajay recalls about Queens.

“Queen was a port for Indians. Indian stores were not specialized then. The same store that sold Red Fort rice also carried saris, also had calculators, blood pressure cuffs, and the sort of things that people took back to India as gifts. Back then even in Queens, there were not yet enough Indians for the stores to carry produce.” (Sharma, 2014: 36)

One important setting in this novel is the temple where the family frequently pay visit. The Mishras describes as pious Hindu, so culturally they pray at temple to earn blessing. There is a distinct feature about the temple in America that differs from the one the family used to pray in India. The quotation below shows how Ajay interestingly describes the temples.

“In America, we went to temple on Friday, as my mother said, begin the weekend with a clean mind. Our temple was one of just a few on the Eastern Seaboard. Inside the large, dim chamber there were idols along three walls and the air smelled of incense, like the incense in temples in India. In India though, temples also smelled of flowers, of sweat from the crowds, of spoilage from the milk used to bathe the idols. Here along with the smell of incense, there is only a faint odor of mildew. Because the temple smelled so simple, it seemed fake.” (Sharma, 2014:37)

3.2. The Weaknesses of the Novel

Although *Family Life* has a number of strengths, it also has weaknesses. The first weakness is *Family Life* ends in a moment of ambiguity.

“I got happier and happier. In the distance was the beach and the breaking waves and the red seaplane bobbing in the water. The happiness was almost heavy. And that was when I knew I had a problem.”(Sharma, 2014:218)

The statement above leaves readers with questions what is actually about this moment that within Ajay’s happiness he states he has a problem. The novel does not give readers a clear description about Ajay’s problem and he does not give a clue if he will escape or solve it.

The second weakness is dealing with the language and style of writing. Sharma’s writing style is influenced by the writing style of Hemingway. Basically, Hemingway’s writing style is simple and direct. For example, in one of his novels, *The Old Man and The Sea*, Hemingway uses simple and natural language style. Hemingway’s style of writing also simplifies an honest portrayal of human emotion. In *Family Life*, the character Ajay points out his feeling about Hemingway’s writing after he reads an essay that reveals Hemingway’s mistake. “Even though I hadn’t read the novel, I felt I knew the book from having read other essays. I read about Hemingway’s mistakes and felt that what probably matters in a book is its emotional truth” (Sharma, 2014:154).

In writing *Family Life*, Sharma writes how a character feels instead of demonstrating it through action or dialogue. There is almost no action or tension created to move the story. Its lack of tension results in the story to go flat. The use of simplistic language in a lack of dialogue story can easily make reader falls on boredom.

4. CONCLUSION

Family Life by Akhil Sharma presents an interesting theme. Sharma makes an immigrant story in a fascinating way. Sharma gives well description about family's response to grief and becomes one of the strengths of the novel. Sharma also gives well description of each character and setting in the novel. In addition to having the strengths, there are some weaknesses found in the novel. The first weakness is *Family Life* ends with ambiguity. Sharma does not give clear information about the ending; on why the main character Ajay feels he has a problem, and Sharma does not give a clue about Ajay's burdening happiness. The second weakness is in writing *Family Life*, Sharma uses Hemingway's style of writing that emphasizes in simplicity and honest portrayal of emotion that to some extent leads to vagueness.

Finally, with many strengths and weaknesses, *Family Life* is a recommended novel especially for those who like immigrant story. Akhil Sharma successfully writes immigrant experience in response to grief with an inspiring manner. The story has a clear explanation to the readers that sometimes unexpected thing happens in life. Grief may be too painful to accept, but within grief there is ease.

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Family Life is a heartbreaking novel-from-life about a boy whose brother becomes brain damaged after diving into a pool. What begins as a reflection on familial relationships evolves into a meditation on fate, as Ajay questions his own emotional responses to his brother's tragic accident. The book opens in Delhi, India in the late '70s ("children playing cricket in the middle of the street and rarely having to move out of the way to let cars by"), where eight-year-old Ajay and his older brother Birju are anxiously awaiting their move to America. Upon arriving Described in The New York Times Sunday Book Review as 'deeply unnerving and gorgeously tender at its core', Family Life is the story of Ajay Mishra and his family, as they struggle for rebalance after a devastating accident. It's also the story of Akhil Sharma, a fictionalization of the author's boyhood: he has stated 'almost everything in the novel is true'. But, he explains, 'I think one can be more honest in fiction than in a memoir'.[^] Mohsin Hamid, interviewing Sharma for Guernica Magazine, also speaks of his writing as tender. Sharma responds to this with a rather lovely discussion of the tenderness of exposition. He comes across as thoughtful and understated - but Hamid is at pains to stress how joyful their conversation was. Family Life is autobiographical. Sharma also emigrated from India to the United States and his elder brother was severely brain-damaged in an accident. The book took Sharma over 12 years to write and it is well worth the wait. This is a beautiful, tragic and often funny novel. It is also an important novel. In a time when more and more family members are caring for their loved ones, Family Life offers succour by shining a much-needed light on the stresses, strains and daily grind of this forgotten "workforce". Sharma does not shy away from the awfulness of the situation but neither does he wal