

(Mal) adjusted Sensibilities of a Toiling Immigrant: A Study of Akhil Sharma's
'Family Life'

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Abstract

Akhil Sharma's *Family Life* deals with the anguishes and anxieties of the narrator-protagonist Ajay Mishra as he shifts from Delhi to Queens in USA along with his family when he is eight years old. The novel presents the psychological and moral journey of Ajay as he moves through a series of mishaps and (mal)adjustments in a diasporic set up. He fights his loneliness as his mother and father gets busy with his invalid brother to come up to be a successful man but still lies an undefined "problem" – the problem probably all diasporic individuals have, which is a strong nostalgia for their original homeland.

Key Words: Akhil Sharma, Bildungsroman, Diaspora, Family Life, Imaginary Homeland, Immigrant, Migrancy

In the context of the current economic and cultural globalization, migration from one nation to another and faster communicative practices, it is more significant to decipher the implications of the term 'diaspora', as the term has become and more tentative and intricate. Robin Cohen in his book *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* quotes William Safaran to talk about certain characteristics of diaspora, several of which must be shared by the members of an 'expatriate minority community' to be described as a diaspora :

- i. They or their ancestors have been dispersed from a specific original 'centre' to two or more foreign regions;
- ii. they retain a collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland including its location, history and achievements;

- iii. they believe that they are not... fully accepted by their host society and so remain partly separate;
- iv. their ancestral home is idealized and it is thought that, when conditions are favourable;
- v. they believe all members of diaspora should be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their homeland...;

They continue to relate to that homeland and their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity are...defined by the existence of such relationship." (Cohen 6)

The people of the diasporic community share a longing for the centre, that is, their homeland that they or their ancestors have left, either forcibly dispersed or voluntarily or consciously moved. This longing may not necessarily be so that they always want to come back to their mother country, though

the longing always remains for the same. Consequently, the identity of the diasporic individual or the community is never fixed, never static, it is ever changing. They live in an in-between culture where they are nostalgic about what they have left behind and at the same time they try to assimilate to their host country and culture. Thus, both the erstwhile and the host nations become spaces for their 'imaginary homelands'.

Akhil Sharma's second semi-autobiographical novel *Family Life*, published in 2014, has brought into attention the agonizing sensibilities of the diasporic people which made the novel an immediate success all over the world. The novel is about Mishra family, who migrates to the U.S.A in 1970s and finds it difficult to acclimatize in the diasporic context. Sudesh Mishra while commenting on diasporic writers "From Sugar to Masala: Writing by the Indian Diaspora" writes:

Whereas the writers of the old diaspora tend to concentrate on the chinks within, say the *girit* enclave, the new diasporic writers are inclined to inhabit the luminal or threshold zone of intercutting subjectivities that defines the experience of migrancy. (Mishra 287).

In the pre-independence times, expatriation was primarily due to the colonizers creating of situations that drove the people to work as slaves in sugar plantations or for railways or as small traders and entrepreneurs in Africa, Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad, Surinam and Caribbean. But trends started changing in 1960s, when immigration laws were relaxed for professionals especially for migration to

America. That was the time, the phenomenon termed as 'brain-drain' started. There was a willful migration by people to move to greener pastures, to achieve the dream of cushioned lives, to be able to gain one's own economic prosperity. The history of the migrations from India, especially in the last century, setting is tracked by Jayaram in the following lines:

Large scale migrations of Indians was facilitated by the integration of peripheral economies into the emerging world capitalist system, the onset of a revolution in transportation and communication ... the phenomenal trade surpluses ... geographical discoveries .., cheap and regulated labour force ... A combination of factors made India (and China) an extant reservoir of cheap, docile and dependable labour ...

A new and significant phase of migration began after India became independent in 1947. Broadly, three patterns of immigration can be identified in the post-colonial immigration: (1) the migration of Anglo-Indians to Australia and England, (2) The immigration of professionals to US, England and Canada, and (3) the immigration of skilled and unskilled labourers to West Asia ... With the second and subsequent generations having emerged, and the emigrant population enjoying economic prosperity and socio-cultural rights, this stream of immigration has resulted in vibrant Indian communities abroad. (Jayaram 20 – 22)

The novel *Family Life*, deals with the subjective experiences of the narrator protagonist Ajay Mishra who migrates to USA when he was a child of eight years old along with his parents and elder brother, Birju. His father, an accountant by profession, always dreamt of emigrating to first-world countries, while his mother, a high school teacher, had “no interest in emigrating for herself”(8) But while in New Delhi in the 1970s, the family experienced many uncertainties due to the declaration of Emergency by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi:

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.... They began to feel that even though they were ordinary and not likely to get into trouble with the government, it might be still better to leave. (8).

In such circumstances, the Mishra family thought of migrating to America in search of better opportunities. But better opportunities are not so easy to come by even in USA as one has to live a hard life and toil for things even in USA. People have this notion that migration to USA means that there are vast opportunities lying and one can just have a life of luxury. But often diasporic novelists show exactly the opposite – the real truth of the lives of the migrants. For example, Biju in Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* represent those sections of the diasporic community who belong to the lower classes of society of their mother country and because of lack of educational qualifications are mostly utilized in shoddy jobs in the

migrant country. The situation for them remains the same whether in mother country or in the host country.

If Biju belongs to the uneducated lower class and therefore had to bear the brunt of being in a diasporic set up, then the Mishra family as they shift to one-bedroom apartment in Queens had to face immense hardships to settle in USA. Two years go by in their process of settling down and then the family is stuck with a tragedy, when Birju, the elder brother, meets an accident at a swimming pool where his head hits the bottom of the pool and he remains unconscious for three minutes under water leading to irreversible brain damage – as he becomes invalid. From then on, the mother of these kids become compulsively devoted to cure her invalid son and the father sinks into alcoholism. The ten-year-old Ajay from then on has to figure out his own ways in a hostile American diasporic environment to negotiate his daily life as an immigrant child – the novel charts the process of psychological and moral growing up of Ajay amidst these and other tensions leading many to believe that the novel is a bildungsroman. Though the novel is about the process of growing up of Ajay, yet through this process Akhil Sharma is able to comment considerably on the anguishes of the diasporic being in America.

Ajay is fascinated with the riches and opulence of America. He is awe-struck when he saw a wall to wall carpet in his apartment at Queens. Watching hot water gushing forth from the faucet seemed to him like witnessing a fairy tale. The round the clock television programmes and advertisements in coloured papers

demonstrate the prosperity of the new land. The movement of elevator at the press of button and opening of sliding doors at his approach made Ajay feel powerful and important. In spite of all these thrills, in school, he developed a fear of “getting lost in the vastness of the school.” (28) The Diwali day brings forth Ajay reminiscences his Diwali in India and comparing it with the experience of Diwali in America, he comments:

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. (27-28).

There are moments of these kinds of nostalgia, when the protagonist Ajay looks back at his own culture back in India and misses it badly. He may be growing up to be an American, but at his heart somewhere the “Indianness” has its firm roots which make him long for things Indian. This presents the ‘hybridity’ of their existence when they are American and yet Indian – “double, not yet one”, to use a phrase of Homi Bhabha. Like a post-colonial, the diasporic individual is deeply divided – there are two forces working on him or her – the push factor to establish oneself to be materially successful in the American context and economically

establish oneself and on the other hand, there is a deep pull of the motherland and its culture.

In Frantz Fanon’s view, diasporic community is a community of “individuals without an anchor, without horizon, colourless, stateless, rootless.” (1963:176) In other words, diasporic people find it problematic to make themselves ‘rooted’ to a particular physical set up as they have taken a flight from their roots to reach greater heights. In this process, some suffer from rootlessness and consequently always long for the roots while others try to bring certain cultural practices and rituals of their mother country into their lives in the new land, whereas some in the process of getting accustomed to the new set up marks a change in their lives and lifestyles.

Mishra, in order to compensate for the loss of familiar, becomes deeply religious and starts visiting temple in America ritualistically. It also provides them an identity and an opportunity to connect with other members of Indian community. Ajay says about temples in America in the following terms:

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.” (29)

Salman Rushdie talks about the need of emigrants for creating the Imaginary Homeland: “that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions... imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.” (10) The temple seems “fake” as it does not have any thing familiar to it as one sees it in a temple in India. yet one needs to visit the temple in America, because one needs to be deeply ritual to hang on to the culture of the motherland. It is this anguish of the diasporic individual which finds deep manifestation throughout the novel.

Not only there is a sense of anguish because of the supposed “fakeness” of the temple and related things in America, but also because one feels himself or herself a little alien in the foreign land. He felt strange for at every step he encounters cultural and racial difference. As a child, he finds it overwhelming. Ajay describes his initial experience with his classmates:

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 (27).

Moreover, being not a part of America, being non-white, the diasporic kids fail to get assimilated with the white Americans. They stand out due to their racial difference, lack of confidence and awkward manners in

an alien culture. They are often singled out for bullying and harassment. Ajay talks about his experience in an American school:

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.* (27)

A diasporic individual idealizes his original homeland and attaches a certain degree of glamour to compensate for the loss, one suffers in the process of immigration and acculturation in an alien culture. Ajay, in order to compensate for his maladjustment in the class ended up concocting an ideal brother, Birju, who had extraordinary abilities. Birju of his tales was a great basketball player, a karate expert, a very fast runner, could solve mathematics problems too difficult even for professors and capable of other superhuman achievements. Through this glorification of Birju, Ajay attempts to escape the ordinariness of his origins and the dismal situation of his family. He observes:

Whenever I told someone about Birju, I felt compelled to lie about his wonderfulness. Because we had

received so little money in the settlement, which meant that Birju was an ordinary boy, lying seemed the only way to explain that what had happened to him was awful, was the worst thing in the world. Birju, I said, had rescued a woman trapped in a burning car. Birju had had a great talent for music and a photographic memory. (102)

Akhil Sharma seems to be presenting all the issues in the novel which deals with the problems of a diasporic child growing up in a foreign land. The notion of physical, psychological and moral adjustments that one has to make in the process of growing up in a diasporic set up seems to be the theme of the novel. In such a diasporic set up, when Ajay grows up in his solitude with a family where the mother is busy with his invalid brother and father with his alcoholism, Ajay finds some solace in his books and literature:

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. (160-161)

Ajay immerses in the life of Ernest Hemingway and to some extent delves himself into Hemingway's adventurous experiences. Reading stories made him belong to world of story writing and appreciation. He felt that in this world people escaped worrying by giving vent to their creative faculty and were able to

experience pleasure. As he keeps reading Hemingway, 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. (162)

These readings help Ajay find himself settled to the ways of the America and forget the pain of having an alcoholic father, a brain-damaged brother, an anxious mother and the stress of maintaining a façade of normalcy before the other members of Indian community, who respected them. Reading enabled him to escape the mundane anxieties of life and enter a world of sublime pleasures. Fiction opened him to a world where people travelled, had agency and wealth, without undergoing the drudgery of becoming "a doctor or an engineer." (154) In exposure to great literature, he finds some solace. He says:

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. (158)

Mishra family because of their sacrifices in looking after Birju gained respect in the expatriate Indian community. Members of the community start considering them as pious and seek blessings from them for

themselves and their children. They also use it as an opportunity to demonstrate their children the superiority of Indian family values by showing parents, who would sacrifice their personal lives to extend love and care to their brain damaged child. Subha, Ajay's mother, is very conscious of the opinions of the members of her community. She prefers to describe that Birju is in coma, which she thinks is more acceptable than 'brain-damaged'. She also takes a lot of pains to keep her husband's addiction a secret. But finally, when the news of her husband being an alcoholic spread, the people of her community "stopped visiting." (208). Even her mother's best friend, Mrs. Sethi abandoned them. Ajay observes:

After my father's drinking became known, she had stopped talking to my mother, stopped visiting us or calling or returning my mother's phone calls. A part of me recognized that this made sense. Why spend time with strange, troubled embarrassing people? Why seek problems? But the very fact that this

made sense made my embarrassment worse. (214)

Yet after all these Ajay is able to get admission into Princeton. After his graduation he became an investment banker. With a good job and successful career, he also acquires status and prestige. At the end of the novel he seems to be a happier individual though he still has his problems. He reflects:

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. (228)

A diasporic individual will always have an undefined "problem", however successful he or she is in the land of his or her choice, because somewhere there will always be a deep longing for the motherland – that seems to be the crux of the anguish of a diasporic individual's existence, as Akhil Sharma puts it through his protagonist Ajay.

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