

# The Sociocultural Milieu in Family Life by Akhil Sharma

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## **Abstract:**

The novel, *Family Life* by Akhil Sharma, presents the sociocultural milieu of both native and dominant cultures to understand the acculturative process of the characters. This research paper will provide a detailed analysis of Ajay, Rajinder (Mr. Mishra), and Shuba (Mrs. Mishra) struggles in the light of acculturation.

**Keywords:** sociocultural, pathoric, acculturation, immigrant, traditional and faith.

## **Introduction:**

Akhil Sharma was born in 22nd July 1971 in Delhi. He moved to America with his family when he was eight in 1979. He spent childhood in Edison and New Jersey and done his school life from J.P. Stevens High School. Akhil Sharma explains about his struggles in school and city life as "People cursing at us in the street, and being spat at school." He had completed his BA from Princeton University. Akhil Sharma has published many fictions and non-fictions. His first novel *An Obedient Father* (2000) had won the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award in 2001. His second novel *Family Life* (2014) had won the 2015 Folio Prize and 2016 International Dublin Literary Award. *Family Life* by Akhil Sharma presents the lives of Mishra family, especially Ajay, a son of Mr. Mishra in the changed phenomena which takes place when the family gets shifted to America from India. Ajay and Birju are the sons of Mr. Rajinder Mishra and Mrs. Shuba Mishra. Ajay is younger son whereas Birju is the elder one. The story is about the childhood and adolescent life of Ajay in America, and also the story delineates Ajay's family experiences as immigrants in America—a foreign country.

## **Life in America vs India:**

The novel is the best example of the acculturation process of Ajay. The novel starts in the flashback. In the present time, Ajay, when this flashback is running in his mind, he is already an adult man and has passed his days of childhood and adolescence—the core time duration of the story. The plot of the story gives the description of the present time about Ajay's mother and father's typical nature when Ajay is of forty and his father is of seventy-two, now at home in New Jersey. Here, Ajay as a narrator recalls the past on how they were living in India on a roof of a two-story house in Delhi. This is what re-living the past in present, and an attempt to see the present in the light of the past.

The novel starts with the description of Ajay's mother and father's typical nature when Ajay of forty and his father of seventy-two, now at home in New Jersey. Here, Ajay as a narrator recalls the past on how they were living in India on a roof of a two-story house in Delhi. His father was an Accountant and his dream was to shift to America and own the American lifestyle. His father was feeling much odd living in India; the Indian buildings were making him feel disowned. He had faith in modern science

heavily, so he had faith in Doctors there. While talking with Doctors, he used to feel like he is already there in Europe or America. Even Ajay's own views on science were much favouring to the west organisations since the green revolution was the brainchild of them. The great image of the west has already taken place in the family.

His mother, Mrs. Shuba Mishra was a school teacher. She was teaching economics there. She was not crazy about going abroad. She felt nice being what she was. But for her son, abroad could be a better opportunity, she thought. During the time, there came Indira Gandhi's Emergency which made people think about leaving India. This tyrant side of the then government made them strong to take the decision to leave the country. In 1978, Mr. Mishra came to America permanently with his family. Mr. Mishra and Mrs. Mishra have different approach for life style. Mr. Mishra was interested in showing off his richness. But Mrs. Mishra was prioritising education than richness. The reason for their approach was their parent's poverty. They had lived average life in India where they have to compromise with all things. In America, Mr. Mishra was much enjoying showing his family to the life style of America. He shows the toilet and toilet paper. It was for the first time their children saw hot water being poured out of the tap.

Otherwise in India, in the days of winter, Mrs. Mishra in the morning used to heat pot of water on the stove. Watching all day cartoon channel program on TV with so many other channels or seeing the automated sliding door on arrival at the apartment or watching four-lane roads in the front of their apartment or even gazing at the signal lights at a crossroad and traffic police in white uniform stood underneath made children dazzled in the new country. Their father started making some decision on what to do to make progress in education and so on. For that, he made them visit various libraries. Among the libraries, the only library at Queens was a huge one. It had so many rooms and books. Once Mr. Mishra asked his sons if they would read a book, they would get fifty cents. This was in the form of bribe though, but this made them help progress in their education. One of the intentions of a father was to send Birju in a reputed school named The Bronx High School of Science.

In school time, Ajay used to sit in the back side of the class near door. His English teacher sounded incomprehensible. Sometimes, he had to exercise to recognise the white boys since almost all seemed alike. The school was so huge that he feared he could be lost if he went for toilet. The whole environment at school was so different for Ajay that sometimes he felt difficult to match with other boys there. Sometimes, he had to face fight with boys on any odd behaviour of him. It was a time of Diwali when going to school created a compulsion for Ajay. He started missing India as to how in India they had holidays and they used to wear new clothes. Ajay yelled that though America is richer than India richness creates less happiness as what Indian festivals can. Making extra rotis for wandering cows near neighbourhood was a practice in India for blessings. At America, they started visiting the temple every week. But the temple due to its simple fragrance seemed to Ajay a fake one. One night the drifting of snow down created trill for Ajay. He thought as if he were in a book or a TV show.

America started giving the best thing to Ajay was library apart from television. Here the boy's imagination of American life had taken place, partly from books and partly from the TV channel. Seeing girls in swimsuits on TV created a desire in him of American life. Before America, he never read books for the sake of reading it. Then the practice of reading got shaped in him for a better future. Mrs. Mishra started doing a job in a garment company. She was trying to adjust in a uniform which was not fitting

well due to her weight. Though having this compulsive American life, Mrs. Mishra did not change her approach of looking at her job and handling routine for household work. Till America, the maturity of Birju could not be revealed since as a big brother, he started taking care of Ajay's meal as well as of his homework. This is how life started shaping into a new dimension where they were leaving Indiannes behind. Mr. Mishra started compelling his sons to watch TV news Movies like 'The Empire Strikes Back' which was a practice to make them acquainted with American phenomena. One day an envelope in thick paper arrived at home. But the mother told not to open until she arrived home. They opened the envelope before the idol of God at the temple.

### **Plethoric struggles**

This, however, seemed to Ajay a senseless practice since the decision cannot be changed because it had taken place before the envelope was formed. They found Birju got admission in the Bronx. It was a wonderful moment for mother and treat giving moment for Ajay as it was now his turn to be ready for such giant preparation. One afternoon at their aunt's home when Ajay was watching his favourite TV program and Birju went to swimming pool in neighbourhood. Birju got an accident while jumping into the pool. Their aunt with fear on her face approached Ajay to be ready hurriedly for they were going to the place where the accident happened. They went there. Aunt told Ajay to be on edge of the crowd. She came back seeing the real condition and told Ajay to go back home because she was accompanying Birju to hospital. While at home, his uncle came and said nothing about the real situation to Ajay. Till ten o'clock at the night, they became ready for bus stand because mother was going to arrive there and they were going to pick her up. Mrs. Mishra finally arrived with a serious face.

They then went to the hospital where Birju was kept on the bed with an oxygen mask on face and other pipes attached on his body. This scene shocked Mrs. Mishra. She started crying on the door seeing Birju in this situation. As days passed, the conversation between Mr. & Mrs. Mishra got worsened and became bitter day by day. Any logic or scolding of Mr. Mishra about why and how the accident happened gave birth to verbal fights between him and his wife. Even behaving well or speaking good words of Mr. Mishra, made her irritated. Later on, the routine singing and prayer of Ajay started boring him. Fight between Ajay's parents became common then. Ajay then diverted his mind into reading books and TV than feeling bad on the then present situation. Then the family moved Birju to a nursing home nearby. It was not better as the hospital was. It was too silent. Mr. Mishra's habit of liquor worsened. Initially ignored by Mrs. Mishra, but later on, she started shouting at his husband's habit.

The family then moved to Metuchen, a town in New Jersey where a temple was situated. One day Mrs. Mishra took Ajay to the temple where Ajay asked the pundit, Mr. Narayan, about his life and he knew that Mr. Narayan was basically an engineer. But he became pundit voluntarily. Since people could not afford a pundit in those days in America, the volunteer pundit became the norm. Usually, the pundit in India never works as counsellor or pardoner like Christian. But in America, this was happening. On calling of Ajay's mother, Mr. Narayan visited Birju. Beside the bed of Birju, he sat in a specific posture. Later on, the family decided to buy own house where they could keep Birju instead of keeping him at the nursing home. Mr. Narayan helped the family meet Mr. Gupta, a real estate agent. Mr. Gupta showed the family many houses on every Saturday. Mr. Gupta had a Mercedes sedan car. It was the first time the family sat in Mercedes. At school, Ajay decided that he would not speak to anyone about his Brother. Because he believed that speaking truth about his brother occurred loss in terms of an

opportunity for good attention from people. But at school, on being asked by Jeff, one white classmate, whether he had a brother, Ajay replied initially no. But very soon, he changed his words and told all the real matter.

In seventh grade, Ajay's class was divided into honour-level classes. This was the time when Ajay felt smart and intelligent. In his class, there were Jews and a few black and two Indians. The Indians were not good at accents. He was good in the company of Jews rather with Indians. In his Tenth grade, Ajay wanted to make a girlfriend. He started liking a girl named Rita. One day, Ajay tried to call her. On phone, Ajay could not figure out what exactly she was feeling about him. It was difficult for Ajay to enter in the classroom the next day, where she used to be with him. This shows Ajay's Indianess.

### **Happiness as Heavy**

After Ajay left for college, there changed many things outside in the market. New immigrant came to reside. More and more people coming made the area more crowded and many other problems with whites cropped up. After completing college, Ajay found a job as an investment banker. He used to be hard working. For seven years, he did not date any girl regularly since he had a hectic schedule in his workplace. He gave a million-dollar cheque to his mom, which his mom saved for several days to show to her friends in society. Ajay, at the end, found a girl of his choice named Hema. Hema was an accountant by profession. They met at a party. The end of the novel describes a place of happiness where both Ajay and Hema are being seated together. Lastly, Hema's weight on Ajay's shoulder describes happiness as heavy.

### **Conclusion**

The novel *Family Life* by Akhil Sharma presents mainly three characters that get acculturated in America. Three of them have different ways and approaches to deal with circumstances presented in America. Mr. Mishra's approach towards dominant culture is much positive, Mrs. Mishra, right from the very first, is happy in dealing with Indian condition. For her, the arrival in America was her children's needs and not her choice, since she firmly remained connected with her native culture and religious rituals. The larger portion underlined the character of Ajay who is the semblance of the writer of this novel. This novel presents the growth of the cultural sense in the character Ajay, by showing his swifts of orientation and at last, the stability and maintains of both the cultures in his attitude and behaviour.

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