

BOOK REVIEW OF *FAMILY LIFE* WRITTEN BY AKHIL SHARMA

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1. INTRODUCTION

Family Life is the second 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.

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 sent 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. In the end, Ajay begins to understand the difference between his life and his brother's life.

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. *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.

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 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 said. "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 Character

In *Family Life*, characters are divided into two which are flat character and round character. 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. 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 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.

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.

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)

It can be seen from the quotation above 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.

Another notable setting is Queens, New York. Queens is the place where the family settles for the first time upon their arrival in America. There is a distinct description about Queens. According to Ajay, Queens is “a port for Indian”.

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 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 Ernest 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 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 plain. 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. 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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