
AKHIL SHARMA'S FAMILY LIFE: REGRETTING DOUBLENESS OF DIASPORA INDIVIDUALS

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ABSTRACT

This study discusses a matter of cultural identity faced by diaspora individuals in Akhil Sharma's novel *Family Life*. As a diasporic Indian American, Sharma depicts that cultural identity is problematic, especially for an individual who experiences two or more conflicted cultures from home left behind and the home this individual has moved to. Sharma also demonstrates that the identity of this diasporic is never complete. This study aims to critically analyze Sharma's fiction by highlighting the issues he engages as a diasporic writer. It also depicts how voluntary displacement done by diaspora characters tends to lead them to mourn. The analysis applies a concept of cultural identity by Stuart Hall. It explains a notion of identity within the discourses of history and culture, which is not an essence but a positioning. This study uses a qualitative descriptive method. The result shows there is doubleness of cultural identity conveyed by Sharma. This regretting doubleness appears in structured stages: admiring the West and being rejected by the West.

Keywords: *cultural identity, diaspora, East, marginalization, West*

INTRODUCTION

A group of individuals may share a common cultural identity when they have no differences in race and ethnicity. However, colonization brings people with a different culture to run life as a community. When colonization ended, the access to blend with a new society through immigration also increased. As happened in Canada after the Second World War, a new wave of immigrants from non-European countries moved to Canada, making Canada increasingly racially and ethnically diverse (Fong, 2009). This diversity brings Canada to be one of the most multicultural lands in the world.

Canada, the United States, and Australia are multicultural countries because they are home to immigrants from many countries and form their ethnicity in the new lands (Sitepu, 2017). People with different cultures live with various unconscious conventions in this multicultural society. For example,

a Japanese Canadian may frequently greet others by shaking hands instead of bowing. It is not because bowing is taboo in Canada, but shaking hands is the standard way to greet.

Besides, an individual in a multicultural society tends to experience more than one culture since she interacts with people from various races and ethnicities. Migrants are between two cultures, especially the second and the third generation. In order to avoid marginalization, these diaspora characters need to adapt to other cultures. It leads their cultural identity to instability. It indicates that they are in doubleness, a condition when an individual holds more than one culture simultaneously. Consequently, this condition leads diaspora to invoke the imagery of trauma of separation and dislocation (Asghar & Sharjeel, 2020).

When someone celebrates her culture and other

cultures, it highly establishes tolerance. However, this multicultural condition also produces desires and anxieties (Fortier, 2008). It is because multicultural society forms majority and minority. This majority tends to do cultural domination toward the minority habitually. As an effect, minority needs to struggle to avoid discrimination. It indicates that minority tends to be individuals who suffer from anxiety even though they have faded their true identity. Besides, this minority engages in a quest for identity resulting in cultural confrontation and identity crisis (Dash & Chetia, 2017).

A condition when diasporic individuals experience two or more conflicting cultures that bring their cultural identity into doubleness appears in numerous literary works written by diaspora authors. One of them is a novel entitled *Family Life*. This novel was published in 2014 and enlisted as 10 Best Books by *The New York Times*. The author, Akhil Sharma, won PEN/Hemingway Award. He is a native New Delhi who lives in New York City as an assistant professor of English at Rutgers University. In this study, Sharma depicts Indian diaspora characters as a minority group in a multicultural society who have adapted themselves to new cultures. However, the majority still reject them no matter how much they have tried to fade away from their authentic culture. Therefore, this study aims to reveal the regretting doubleness of diaspora characters in structured stages: admiring the West, being rejected by the West, and othering the Self in Akhil Sharma's novel, *Family Life*. It also aims at portraying how voluntary displacement done by diaspora characters tends to lead them to mourn.

There are some studies dealing with diaspora issues that some researchers conducted. One of them is entitled *The Concept of Home in Palestinian Diaspora Fiction: A Critical Study of Randa Jarra's Fiction* (2018) which Jameel Ahmed Alghaberi conducted. He analyzed a literary work written by Randa Jarra and found his wonders in defining home and cultural identity as the effect of being a Palestinian diaspora. Another study on this issue was conducted by Preteti Shirodkar (2019), entitled *Trauma, Terror and the Modern Day of Diaspora: Decoding the (Con)Text of Loss in Munaweera's Fiction*. In this study, Shirodkar discussed how a diasporic character is both endearing and enduring in her emotion for being positioned as other. For a diaspora character, a loss is a part that cannot be avoided (Shirodkar, 2019).

This study employs Stuart Hall's concept concerning cultural identity and diaspora (Hall, 1996). Generally, people with similar cultural backgrounds share the same cultural identity. It reveals that identity forms within the discourses of history and culture; it is not essence but positioning (Hall, 1996). It implies that cultural identity does not just emerge, but it is formed in a structured way through society around. Therefore, cultural identity is not a stable thing. It can mix with other cultures or shift to a new one when an individual moves to a new community with different cultures. Hence, cultural identity instability exists for those who engage with two or more conflicted cultures simultaneously. This situation leads them to have cultural identity doubleness. Cultural identity doubleness means an identity that is not stable and changeable since diaspora individuals always trailed collective memory about another place and time and created new maps of desire and attachment (Riaz & Babae, 2015).

Cultural identity is a representation of an individual. However, when the individual experiences some diverged cultures simultaneously, he has to face some struggles with identity. It evokes an idea that identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as most people think. It is a matter of 'becoming' and 'being' (Hall, 1996). It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something that already exists, transcending place, time, history, and culture. Cultural identity comes from somewhere and has history, but they undergo a constant transformation like everything historical.

It implies that cultural identity is complicated and complex, involving various processes. Identity is depicted as something that symbolizes transformation, which makes everyone vulnerable to confronting identity struggle. This struggle that brings doubleness occurs to be accepted by a community. In this phase, an individual encounters cultural interaction in a condition where there is a more dominant culture than hers.

A condition in which there is doubleness of cultural identity happens most commonly to diaspora individuals. This diaspora refers not only to an individual who leaves her homeland to move to another country but also to an individual who accepts diversity. The diaspora experience refers to recognizing necessary heterogeneity and diversity (Hall, 1996). Those who own diaspora identities

constantly produce and reproduce themselves anew through transformation and deference. However, home is always a part of diasporic individuals. For them, the home takes a role in reproducing structures of their cultural identity (Bakshi, 2019).

It is a qualitative descriptive study in which the data are taken from a novel written by Akhil Sharma, *Family Life*. The data are collected by reading the novel in-depth to find narrations of cultural identity experienced by diaspora characters in the novel. This topic of diaspora is drawn from the reading, and draft the quotations are analyzed. The data in this study are narrations and dialogues taken from Sharma's novel, *Family Life*. Several books and journal articles related to diaspora studies are also used. Then, the quotations collected from the novels are analyzed to reveal the doubleness of cultural identity faced by diaspora characters in the novel. Next, an analysis essay is arranged toward corpus interpretation obtained. Finally, a conclusion is set to solve any matters of cultural identity faced by diaspora individuals.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This part describes the doubleness of cultural identity, which diaspora characters regret in Akhil Sharma's novel, *Family Life*. Besides, it uncovers the tendency of mourning faced by diaspora characters due to voluntary displacement.

Sharma reveals that cultural identity is complicated for individuals who experience conflicting cultures. Sharma demonstrates these diaspora individuals through an Indian family who immigrates to America in his novel. Even though this immigration is a kind of voluntary displacement, their experiences in engaging in cultural interaction place their cultural identity into doubleness. In matters of truth, they tend to regret this doubleness. The regret does not directly come up. It occurs in structured stages by admiring the West, being rejected by the West, and othering the Self.

Admiring the West

As individuals from formerly colonized countries, characters from India in *Family Life* tend to admire America. This admiration is unavoidable since, in the colonial era, the colonized people were used to being inferior. Western rationality dominated the colonial period, in which non-Westerners were considered

inherently inferior (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2001). The inferiority owned by formerly colonized individuals finally brings them to their doubleness of cultural identity.

In *Family Life*, Sharma portrays how the West is depicted as a place to pursue prosperity by people from a formerly colonized country. It is shown in the quotation below.

"My father had wanted to emigrate to the West ever since he was in his early twenties, ever since America liberalized its immigration policies in 1965. He believed that if he were somewhere else, especially where he earned dollars and was rich, he would be a different person and not feel the way he did. Another reason he wanted to emigrate was that he saw the West as glamorous with the excitement of science (Sharma, 2014: 13)."

Sharma shows how the West is labeled as benevolent hope for Eastern people. When the West's norms, values, and cultural practices, such as America, are considered superior, it is known as hegemonic culture (Kasiyarno, 2014). This situation is observable through Sharma's detailed information about American immigration policies, which indicates as a dream comes true for the Indian character. The words 'where he earned dollars' strengthen the ideas that the West is the only place that can free people from poverty. Furthermore, "West as glamorous with the excitement of science' reveals that the West is regarded as a place where educated people come from and a place to create educated people. The Indian character thinks that the West is always much better than his homeland.

Sharma also frames that the admiration toward the West is a kind of public convention for people in the East. That is why people see an Eastern who is about to go to America as outstanding, as framed in the following quotation:

"Birju and I on the balcony flattened ourselves into the little shade that lay along the wall. Birju looked down at the street and muttered," Everybody becomes your friend when you're going to America (Sharma, 2014: 13)."

The quotation above describes that America can powerfully change a social status of an Eastern person from the perspective of other Eastern people. This

person will be viewed as superior to others. Without any effort, Sharma portrays how the characters are respected in their homeland even though going to America is still a plan. It is a part of the American dream that fulfillment of prosperity can be achieved in America (Duncan & Murnane, 2011). This condition unveils that The Eastern think highly of the West. The quotation below further strengthens this idea:

I continued going to the milk shop every morning. Because I would be emigrating to America, the milkman did not have me to wait in the crowd and instead called me to the front (Sharma, 2014: 26).

The change of attitude that the milkman makes toward the characters shows how Eastern people put themselves lower. In this case, Sharma uncovers that the East unconsciously creates admiration toward the West. Past experiences in the colonization era cause the feeling of being the second that continually grows in Eastern people. It is an elusive and effective strategy of colonial power and knowledge; people are constructed to fit society standardized by colonial (Amina & Ilhem, 2019).

Then, the admiration toward the West is presented through the fact of America owning the things that do not exist yet in India. This brings the idea that the West is wealthier than the East.

During the coming days, the wealth of America kept astonishing me. The television had programming from morning till night. I had never been in an elevator before, and when I pressed a button in the elevator, the elevator started moving (Sharma, 2014: 32).

From morning until night, the television program that amazes the character portrays an image that America was surprising in both entertainment and technology. This leads the character to adore the West. Furthermore, Sharma illustrates how Eastern people are not accustomed to modern things, such as an elevator. In this case, Sharma delivers the notion that the East is too far behind the West. It is also a consequence of colonization, the British rule in India was to raise their power, to create White supremacy (Yousaf, 2021).

Next, Sharma describes the admiration toward the West by comparing America and India in many things. It can be seen in the quotation below:

My father took us to the bathroom to show us toilet paper and hot water. While my mother was interested in status, being better educated than others, or being considered more proper, my father was just interested in being rich (Sharma, 2014: 31).

The quotation above compares the West and the East in quality. First, the words 'being better educated' imply that Eastern people assume that being in Western countries will automatically make them knowledgeable. Being knowledgeable structures American *self-representations*, an ideological tool to project American hegemony outside the US (Paul, 2014).

Then, the words 'being rich' in the quotation above uncovers an idea that for Eastern people, their homeland does not give a chance to their natives to live their life. Finally, the words 'to show us toilet paper and hot water' indicate that the East must be able to adjust themselves to the West because it will elevate their social status.

Getting more understanding about America seems to satisfy Eastern people. Therefore, they unwittingly compete with each other to state that they are educated.

The Sikh boy said, "Americans clean themselves with paper, not water."

"In America, they say 'yeah' not yes. Mrs. Singh told me to let you know (Sharma, 2014: 25)."

The Indian characters try to impress others by giving much information about America in the quotation above. No one asks for this information. This way to get an impression is strongly signified that the West is much superior. Sharma reveals that it is as if America is the center of civilization for Eastern people.

Another admiration toward the West is shown when there is a confession delivered by the character for giving him a chance to be a part of America.

My father, who had seemed pointless in India, had brought us to America and made us rich. What he had done was undeniable (Sharma, 2014: 32).

The quotation above does not merely highlight the father's greatness, but it is more about the greatness of America. There are two opposite words in the quotation above, which are *pointless in India* and *rich in America*.

It illustrates how weak the East is and how strong the West is in succeeding an individual. Moreover, the words 'undeniable' seem to celebrate that America takes a primary role in bringing happiness to the East. America also seems to give chances for everyone to get self-recognition. This imaged America as a warm companion, as a utopian community by coupling the emerging expectations about America (Paul, 2014).

Being Rejected by the West

After assuming that the West is adorable, the East will understand that they are likely to be unrepresented. When they move to America, there is the fact that they are people of India. In this position, they are a minority, and they do not share the same historical and cultural facts with Americans. Cultural identity doubles because they have adopted Western culture, but they will never wholly remove their previous cultural identity. They will always be considered as others, not Americans.

In Sharma's *Family Life*, there is a depiction of how White Americans ignore the diaspora characters since he keeps his culture greeting others. Changing a way to greet is pretty hard because it is a routine he does several times daily. In his novel, Sharma describes this as a way to underrepresent the East.

I came up to a boy and pressed my hands together before me. "Namaste," I said. The boy looked at me strangely (Sharma, 2014: 21).

The quotation above shows how the diaspora character is not accepted since he cannot forget a greeting habit that he used to do in his homeland. When the character presses his hands to greet, the West cannot understand it since they are not familiar with it, and the West is reluctant to accept this kind of culture. In addition, the words *Namaste* leads the West to have the judgment that the character is indeed not a part of them.

Then, diaspora characters also experienced being rejected by the West in such a formal institution as the school. It is depicted in the quotation below.

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 (Sharma, 2014: 35).

Sharma uncovers that physical appearance precisely symbolizes one's cultural identity. The character in *Family Life* comes from India, and the West can differentiate his physical look. Thus, this difference will make the East dominated as framed in words 'often bullied' in the quotation above. Then, 'tell me that I smell bad' is a way for the West not to accept this diaspora character as part of them or their community. Besides, 'a bigger boy would appear so suddenly' indicates that this rejection is intentionally arranged. Their class identity and position are never finally settled (Hall & Jefferson, 2006).

Moreover, the rejection toward the East comes up in the way of underrepresenting him as a joke. It is shown in the quotation below.

Sometimes boys surrounded me and shoved me back and forth, keeping me upright as a kind of game (Sharma, 2014: 35).

Sharma illustrates that the West forms a group to oppress the East through the words 'boys surrounded me'. This collective action weakened the East's position to do some struggles for acceptance as a part of the community. Then, the words 'as a kind of game' uncovers that the West does not position them as a companion but as alien. The rejection toward the East is also portrayed through verbal abuses, as seen in the quotation below.

The white and black children abused us. Boys would walk past us and call, "Shit! I smell shit" (Sharma, 2014: 134).

The fact that the characters are teased as shit shows that he does not get any chance to be accepted. The quotation above also depicts Eastern is not only lower than White but also Black. It means that they receive a total rejection. It triggers diaspora characters to come into mourning. At this level, diaspora characters will miss their homeland, and there will be shifting self-identifications from the home to the homeland (Dayal, 1996).

Diaspora characters also experienced rejection, as seen in the following quotation.

Jeff and Michael began to show their dislike openly. It was now June and hot. In the mornings, when I would try to join them in some ordinary conversation, such as last night's episode of *The A-Team*, they would turn their backs on me and

keep talking (Sharma, 2014: 107).

The quotation above illustrates that some Western people confront the East. They are Jeff and Michael. This number makes them strong enough to oppose the East. The phrase 'their dislike openly' portrays that they are powerful. They no need efforts to do dominations.

On the other hand, the entire thing the East can do is to be silent. He is not even able to deliver his complaints to the West. He does nothing wrong, as the words 'I would try to join' show. In contrast, West is such a controlling character. This West seems to discriminate against the Indian characters in the quotation above.

Then, some places signify the comfort zone of Indians in America. The place is a temple built by the Indian community in America. At the same time, this place shows that the West rejects this community because the Indian character in *Family Life* seems not comfortable with this temple. It can be seen in the quotation below.

In India, though, temples also smelled of flowers, sweat from the crowd, and spoilage from the milk used to bathe the idols. Here, along with the smell of incense, there was only a faint mildew odor. Because the temple smelled so simple, it seemed fake (Sharma, 2014: 37).

As a minority in western land, India generally can powerfully survive through developing a particular area for their space, such as building temples for praying. In western countries, it is commonly located in an area known as Little India. This place implies "cultural politics" in which the performance of diasporic traditions and allegiances to India as a land of origin becomes a basis for cultural citizenship (Eisenlohr, 2006).

However, in *Family Life*, this place seems to be a pitiless area. The previous quotation exposes that for the Indians, the temple located in America does not as not sacred as those in India. It is why the character said the temple is fake. The temple cannot create happiness and mildness for him. It just makes him more different from the West. The memory of this temple also leads the character's identity into doubleness. In the end, he has to face mourning. The memory of the diaspora's homeland suggests identity as changeable, complicated, and dynamic (Chen, 2021).

Next, when an Indian character who has taken a role as a diaspora character tries to compare himself with those who still run their life in India, it shows that the West rejects him for not being able to compete with them. That is why he dared to make the comparison. It is depicted in the following quotation.

My father keeps talking. "It's not so much that we are better than whites, but that the people who come from India to America are the best Indians" (Sharma, 2014: 97).

The quotation above shows that the diaspora character and other Indians who still live in India are assumed to have contrasting personalities. The diaspora character assumes himself as the greater one; it can be seen through the words 'are the best Indians' spoken out by the father (the diaspora character). For him, the native Indian is lower than the diaspora character. He refuses to admit the existence of the native as qualified as him. He declares that 'we are better than whites' portrays how he fears confronting the West because of a considerable probability of being rejected. Besides, his declaration as a true Indian uncovers that he misses his home (India). For diaspora, home is the main element that is not endlessly questioned (Wulandari, 2019).

A condition between East and West has been created since the colonial era. West takes part as the one who dominates, restructures, and has authority over the East. This construction led the East to be underrepresented by the West. It brings the East not to be confident. It is portrayed in the quotation below.

I spoke again. "I learned that everybody in America has their own speedboat." Nobody had told me any such thing (Sharma, 2014: 21).

The quotation above reveals how an Indian, a representative of the East, is undervalued. He thinks that America as a representative of the West is too great. It can be seen through the words 'nobody had told me'. Besides, the quotation above states the idea that it seems unbelievable for an Eastern person to be greater than a Western. The words 'I learn' uncover how inferior the East because it seems that he needs to fit in Western culture, but the Western do not.

CONCLUSION

The analysis results show that Sharma regrets

the cultural identity doubleness of the diaspora characters. His regret strengthens the notion that cultural identity doubleness leads diaspora characters to several troubles. In his novel, *Family Life*, Sharma describes that diaspora characters bear obstacles to this doubleness, making them puzzled. First, they admire the West when comparing it with their homeland. Then, when this admiration develops, and they have already adapted themselves to be just like the West, they face the bitter fact that many Western people reject them. The West does not entirely accept them. Lastly, they cannot distinguish which part of their diaspora identities they are more comfortable with.

All of the stages portray that 'home and homeland' are inseparable for diaspora characters. Even though the new country has already become a home, their homeland cannot be forgotten. Their doubleness of cultural identity uncovers a willingness to keep their homeland and home.

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