

## Disability, Illness and Cultural Belonging in Akhil Sharma's *Family Life*

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The aim of this article is to demonstrate how the discourses of disability/illness and immigration are intertwined in Akhil Sharma's novel *Family Life* (2014). I argue that the characters' negotiation of cultural identities occurs at the intersection of their race, ethnicity, class, and immigrant and ability status, the examination of which reveals a unique experience of oppression of an Indian immigrant family. Recognizing the narrative's resemblance to the "chaos narrative," I explore in particular the narrator's sense of devastation and the narrative's resistance to the cultural expectation of the discourse of triumph. As the study deals with questions of cultural belonging and is sensitive to the sociohistorical context of Indian immigration to the US, an attempt is undertaken to show some aspects of how culture influences the perception of disability and illness.

Keywords: South Asian US literature; disability; illness; immigration; cultural identity

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### Discapacidad, enfermedad y pertenencia cultural en *Family Life*, de Akhil Sharma

El objetivo de este artículo es demostrar cómo los discursos de discapacidad/enfermedad e inmigración se entrelazan en la novela *Family Life* (2014), de Akhil Sharma. Sostengo que la negociación de las identidades culturales por parte de los personajes ocurre en la intersección de su estatus en cuanto a raza, etnia, clase, migración y (dis)capacidad, cuyo examen revela la experiencia única de opresión sufrida por una familia de inmigrantes indios. Reconociendo la semejanza de la narrativa con la "narrativa del caos," exploro en particular la sensación de devastación del narrador y su resistencia a la expectativa cultural del discurso del éxito. El

estudio aborda cuestiones de pertenencia cultural y es sensible al contexto sociohistórico de la inmigración india a EUA, en un intento de mostrar algunos aspectos de cómo la cultura influye en la percepción de la discapacidad y la enfermedad.

Palabras clave: literatura surasiática de EUA; discapacidad; enfermedad; inmigración; identidad cultural

## I. INTRODUCTION

Akhil Sharma's semiautobiographical novel *Family Life* (2014) seems to be a typical immigration story about leaving homeland India for a new world, the US, in search of a better life. The Mishras from Delhi, the two parents and their sons—Ajay, who is eight years old, and Birju, twelve—start a new life in the new place—Queens, New York—in 1979. Consequently, the reader expects typical immigrant subjects such as the putting down of roots, the negotiation of identities or the struggle for the American Dream. Certainly, the narrative embraces all of them, yet they are overshadowed by the theme of disability, which becomes the central issue in the novel. After two years spent in the US, the elder son Birju has an accident in a swimming pool and becomes permanently brain damaged and physically impaired. The narrative turns to the examination of the family's responses to this loss, which come in many forms and with differing intensities. Apart from the analyses of the parents' reactions, the most important element appears to be the introspection of the narrator, the younger son Ajay, who needs to come to terms with the situation he and his family have found themselves in. He is confronted with his brother's disability and his father's alcoholism, and as a result of these dramatic events and new life circumstances, he himself becomes ill, although his illness is never diagnosed or named.

With its easily identified focus on disability and people's responses to it, including illnesses, the novel can be regarded as a study of the universal condition of human existence. In his book on illness narratives, *The Wounded Storyteller*, Arthur Frank states that "commonality of suffering cuts across worlds of race and gender as well as types of disease" (1997, 170), thus indicating that the experience of illness is universal. Sharma himself points to the novel's universal content when he calls it a coming-of-age novel or an illness novel (2014a). Nevertheless, he also claims that he is "OK with the book being called an immigrant novel" (2014a) and speaks of his attempt to link innovation in narrative form with the treatment of an ethnic subject: "My sense is that this is something new: a rigorous modernist novel of the childhood self that deals specifically with the Indian immigrant experience" (2014b).

This study discusses Sharma's novel by placing it at the interface between immigrant and disability discourses. In order to apprehend the significance of the family's experience in the novel, it is necessary to look at disability and illness as intersecting with other social identities, namely, immigrant status, class, gender, race and ethnicity. This perspective shows how disability, which is commonly perceived as alterity and may lead to the "othering" of a subject, cuts across the family's multiple differences—which in their turn can also be perceived as "disabilities" in a new environment—and hinders the family's goal of becoming part of a new society. The characters' negotiation of cultural identities, triggered by the fact of dislocation—migration from India to the US—is interrupted by disability and the illnesses of the father and the narrator stemming from it, and is influenced by these as well as by other social barriers, which were less poignantly apparent before the tragic event. It is legitimate to speak of an

interruption or disturbance caused by disability because the accident leading to Birju's impairment happens two years after the family's arrival in the US, that is, after the initial period of settling down, making plans and having expectations for the future, which means that readers have a certain insight into what might have happened if the accident had not taken place. Significantly, my discussion of the negotiation of identities will not embrace the disabled character, because due to his brain injury Birju's physical abilities are damaged and his cognitive functions are lost. Sharma's novel makes the reader realize the powerful impact of an individual's impairment on the lived experience of other members of the family.

## 2. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

The posited question about negotiation of identities and cultural belonging in the immigrant context belongs to the broad domain of postcolonial theory and criticism. Yet, as scholars point out, despite its attention to questions of identity and critical analyses of difference, the field has been slow to embrace disability and illness (Barker and Murray [2010] 2014, 61), even though it has potential to do so because it focuses on identities negotiated at the intersections. For instance, theorizing postcolonial identity, Homi K. Bhabha famously and influentially opens space to various categories of identity when he stresses "the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences," and further asks, "how are subjects formed 'in-between,' or in excess of, the sum of the 'parts' of difference (usually intoned as race/class/gender, etc.)?" (2004, 2). The familiar triad of race, class and gender has been variously expanded—by adding categories such as generation, geopolitical locale, nationality or religion—to constitute a common yet multifaceted approach to the study of migrant literature, and yet disability and illness have been neglected. According to David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, one of the reasons why the relationship between disability and postcolonial studies has been "discomforting" is because it was the goal of the latter to liberate their identity categories "from debilitating physical and cognitive associations," which resulted in a view of disability as a "'real' limitation from which they must escape" (2000, 2). Working both in postcolonial studies and disability studies, Clare Barker and Stuart Murray claim that postcolonial criticism has a tendency "to treat disability as prosthetic metaphor" ([2010] 2014, 61; see also Barker 2011, 17-18). These scholars also highlight the scarcity of research on disability or illness figurations in diasporic or ethnic fiction, as well as the domination of methodologies developed within the Western academy ([2010] 2014, 61), although the former claim seems to overlook recent work conducted within intersectional disability studies.

Accordingly, while the present discussion of Sharma's *Family Life* draws on various concepts regarding identity introduced by postcolonial theory—cultural identity, in-betweenness, unhomeliness—it benefits from the discourse of intersectionality proposed

by disability studies. The intersectionality framework advocates that disability and illness have to be studied not separately, but at the intersection of different identities. Previous scholarship frequently envisioned disability to be a category “like race,” that is, “a form of embodied difference that could be studied similarly to race, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality” (Adams et al. 2015a, 2). The posited likeness stemmed from the potential for “othering” or disempowering a subject in relation to each of these categories. However, the field of disability studies has transformed considerably since such calls for integration of the categories. In 2006, Christopher M. Bell published his provocative essay “Introducing White Disability Studies: A Modest Proposal,” in which he bemoaned the lack of recognition of people of color either as researchers or objects of study, and admitted “the failure of Disability Studies to engage issues of race and ethnicity in a substantive capacity” (2006, 275). Bell’s call for a recognition of the importance of how disability intersects with race and ethnicity identified a gap in scholarship (278), while at the same time it was the opening gambit in a collective effort to transform the field’s methodology and practice. In the same year, the editors of the special issue on “Race, Ethnicity, Disability, and Literature: Intersections and Interventions” of *MELUS*, the journal of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the US, took an important step when they dismissed the conceptualization of disability as analogous to race or ethnicity and the often used formulation “disability is like race” (James and Wu 2006, 8). Indeed, the analogy or juxtaposition of race with disability seems to be fraught with pitfalls rather than being effective: it suggests separate categories, as a result of which the interests of oppressed groups would be opposed—as in, for instance, black versus disabled people—and additionally it would require a representation in hierarchical terms (Mollow 2006, 284). Consequently, various scholars postulate intersectionality as an appropriate tool to analyze the experience of people located at the interstices of multiple differences. Intersectionality allows one to avoid the temptation to essentialize people with disabilities. As Anna Mollow explains, “in examining intersections of forms of oppression, we guard against the dangers of a ‘disability essentialism,’ in which the experiences, needs, desires, and aims of all disabled people are assumed to be the same” (2006, 284). In other words, it is more fitting to address the complex intersections of, for example, race, gender and ableism in the lives of disabled people of color, rather than assume that the experience of disability is the same for various groups of people (Garland-Thomson [2002] 2014; Erevelles and Minear [2010] 2014; Bell 2011; Jarman 2011).

The present discussion of Sharma’s *Family Life* aims to recognize individuals’ unique experience based on their intersecting identities. The analysis offers insight into how the various aspects of identity—the family being nonwhite immigrants from a so-called Third World country, who are of modest means, have middle-class aspirations, and are affected by the son’s disability and the subsequent illnesses of the father and the younger son—interact with each other, constitute multiple oppressions for the members of the Mishra family and impede their integration into US society.

It allows for a better understanding of the scale of social exclusion they suffer, both from the American environment and the Indian diaspora, and reveals the challenges of the negotiation of cultural identities. The novel is in potential conflict with the disability studies perspective, which has critiqued widespread analogies between disability and disaster, hopelessness and despair, but it can be regarded as an inspiration to rethinking those ideas. In its resemblance to the “chaos narrative” (Frank 1997), it offers insights into the narrator’s illness and can be read in terms of suffering, which cannot be alleviated but has to be paid attention to. Thus, the personal intersects with the social; the sense of hopelessness that permeates the novel and the protagonist’s eventual failure to achieve emotional balance and integrity, despite external signs of his success, can be interpreted as an attempt to reinforce the sense of devastation endured by the family and to promote an understanding of how important systemic support for people suffering from multiple oppressions is.

To some extent, the focus of the article overlaps with the concerns of Medical Humanities. The field is in need of more extensive research that would bring various texts to readers’ attention and would specifically show the different ways in which culture and disability/illness intertwine. Sayantani DasGupta observes that the canonical text to teach how culture influences the perception of illness is Anne Fadiman’s nonfiction book *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (1997), which after being taught in various institutions for many years, “risks being interpreted by health and humanities students as an authoritative text, something that speaks the last word on something called ‘culture’” (DasGupta 2014, 254). In other words, other literary texts with this focus should be highlighted. Sara Van den Berg mentions Sharma’s *Family Life* right next to Fadiman’s book as a novel that represents competing cultural discourses, yet no analysis is offered (2015, 634). The present article aims to contribute to filling in that gap by addressing issues of cultural belonging in the context of disability and illness.

### 3. INTERSECTING IDENTITIES IN *Family Life*

The novel provides a contrast between the expectations of the Mishra family right after they immigrate to the US as fully abled bodies determined to work hard and achieve success, and the tragic accident that deprives them of their dreams and thrusts them into an oppressive situation. Upon their arrival, they acknowledge the attractiveness of the new place and are eager to become Americanized. The descriptions of the family’s exhilaration about their new life contrasted with their previous lifestyle could be seen almost as Orientalist in their emphasis on India’s poverty and the US’s abundance. While in India, the Mishras lived frugal lives, splitting matches in half so that a box would last longer, and the US surprises them with toilet paper, hot water running from the taps, advertisements on colored paper and television. The new country is also a promise of success, provided they work hard. Both parents are able to find jobs, the father as a clerk in a government agency, the mother in a garment factory. The fact of the working

mother is important, suggesting as it does the possibility of smooth integration—the Mishras are not a patriarchal or conservative family devoted to cherishing traditional Indian customs and relegating women to an inferior position and to the sphere of domesticity. Mrs. Mishra is an equal to her husband, which she proved by working as a teacher in India. Although in the US she is not able to find a job in accordance with her education and skills, it is clear that in the new homeland the family do not have to overcome the cultural difference resulting from the often different status of women in India. The Mishras are immigrants driven by the American Dream, who consider assimilation to be an integral step to achieving this goal. The father is depicted as the driving force towards assimilation (Sharma [2014] 2015, 32). The family consciously choose to immerse themselves in the culture of the new country and not fall back on nostalgia for India. They decide to put all their effort into making the US their new home, while the older son's admission to the prestigious Bronx High School of Science, difficult to get into even by US citizens, is perceived as proof of their abilities and a promise for the future.

What Sharma shows most vividly in *Family Life* is not only how vulnerable all people are to disability, but also how the disability of one family member is an experience that affects the whole family. Although disability is depicted as a trigger of the spiral of oppression in which the Mishras find themselves, it is interwoven with other aspects of their identity that constitute their otherness vis-à-vis US, as is especially conspicuous in the case of the younger son, Ajay. In fact, since Ajay is positioned as the narrative voice of the novel, readers discover his experience in particular, while the parents' is filtered through him and therefore already subject to his interpretation. Importantly, although the narrative is retrospective—Ajay is forty when he returns to his childhood to give an account of his “family life,” particularly to explain his father's “glum nature” (3) and his mother's more cheerful spirit, which are closely linked to Birju's tragic accident and its aftermath—readers do not hear a mature, reflective voice but rather that of a boy *experiencing* the situation, and therefore significantly limited in its ability to understand it.

After the portrayal of the Mishras' initial excitement about their life in the US, the narrative shows how their expectations crumble and, despite their efforts to feel included, they find themselves at the fringes of US society, while at the same time their identification with the Indian diaspora becomes, at times, problematic. The deteriorating economic dimension of the Mishras' existence is conspicuous. When it is clear that no treatment is going to be successful and Birju will not be restored to health, the family are left to their own devices with scant economic support. They are not in the privileged situation of being able to afford a convenient nursing home, and even hiring a nurse's aide is a financial burden for them. What adds to the stringent economic situation is the loss of one income, because in order to take care of Birju the mother resigns from her job. Her situation can be discussed in terms of the gender asymmetry concerning caregiving, overwhelmingly a female labor that is often unrecognized and

unpaid (Garland-Thomson 2005; Ginsburg and Rapp 2015). As a result, the mother loses her connection with the US environment and instead strengthens her ties with Indian diasporans, who offer the family a sense of safety that derives from being part of a community, as well as tangible support in taking care of Birju, when neither Western medicine nor the US system can offer more help. The Indian diasporans instill in the Mishras a sense of being model Indians for their commitment to taking care of the disabled son instead of putting him in a nursing home. They view the decision as a sacrifice and a strictly Indian value, which stands in opposition to American values. The novel captures the tensions in the perception of cultural belonging. The members of the Indian community see the Mishras as cherishing their Indianness; therefore, they ask for blessings and seek their advice about how to avoid their children becoming Americanized, even though the Mishras initially desired and endeavored to become Americans, and it is only due to the accident and its consequences that they are, in fact, compelled to resign from the American way of life.

In the same way as his wife, but for different reasons and with a different sense of belonging, Mr. Mishra is relegated to the fringes of US society. The deteriorating economic situation of the family, the lack of psychological assistance and their feeling of abandonment by larger structures of social support exert enormous pressure on him and eventually lead to his inability to function properly—he falls into alcoholism. When, as a consequence, he loses his job, the process of his Americanization is slowed down. To make matters worse, due to his drinking problem and the way he manages it—openly sharing his trouble with others, agreeing to receive institutional treatment and eventually attending AA meetings—he is rejected by other Indian immigrants. Mr. Mishra's belief that alcoholism is a disease is entirely against the values of the Indian community, who regard it as a moral evil—not as an illness, but as an act of will.<sup>1</sup>

It is clear that the role of the Indian diaspora in the novel is not limited only to indicating the immigrant status of the Mishra family. The Indian community acts as a supporter when it provides assistance to the family after the tragic accident or when it offers a space of inclusion for the mother. However, when it imposes cultural restrictions on its members, it creates a context of oppression. After Mr. Mishra's drinking problem is revealed, the diasporans begin to stigmatize the whole family. Erving Goffman identified alcoholism, alongside suicidal attempts, mental disorders or unemployment, as manifestations of one type of stigma, "blemishes of individual character" ([1963] 2006, 132), the other two types being tribal stigma—pertaining to nation, race or religion—and physical stigma—deformations of the body. As Lerita M. Coleman explains, "stigmas mirror culture and society" ([1986] 2006, 141) and people may be stigmatized for "violating norms or being of little economic or political value" ([1986] 2006, 149-50). The stigmatization of the Mishras because of the father's

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<sup>1</sup> In 1956 the American Medical Association declared alcoholism a disease; those who suffer from the (ab) use of alcohol need counselors, psychologists, detoxification centers and special organizations like AA.

alcoholism shows Indians in the US as a highly competitive group that cherishes the idea of success. While impairment resulting from an accident deserves their acceptance and understanding, they cannot accept the father's "self-inflicted" illness. When Mr. Mishra becomes unemployed due to his alcohol abuse, he is going against the rules and expectations of the patriarchal Indian society, where the man is the breadwinner and the steadfast head of the family. He also behaves in a very un-Indian way when he openly discusses his problem and seeks support from an institution. All of that presents him not as a successful Indian male in a new country, but as a failure and a disappointment. Eventually, having an academically successful child enables his readmission into the Indian community and gains their respect. This happens when the younger son Ajay is accepted into the prestigious Bronx High School of Science: the family ceases to be ostracized and once again begins to receive invitations from other families so they can share this success with the community.

The family's stigmatization becomes one of the crucial factors in the formation of Ajay's identity, right alongside his race, ethnicity, sense of belonging and his family's ability status. It cannot be stated with certainty which element is most crucial; rather, it is the interplay of all of them that leads to his feelings of low self-esteem, inferiority and psychological damage. The process of Ajay's cultural identity formation is extremely chaotic. It swings between a sense of belonging and one of exclusion, which can be attributed to the multifarious chaos interrupting his life—geographical and cultural dislocation, perception of racial difference, his brother's impairment, his father's illness and, importantly, his own subsequent illness. The family's economic situation also has a powerful impact on the boy, who later dreams only of financial success. Racist attitudes, which are the family's reality in the US (Sharma [2014] 2015, 127), surface perhaps most distinctly in the narrator's school memories, where he is exposed to violence and xenophobia because of his racial difference—"I was often bullied. Sometimes a little boy would come up to me and tell me that I smelled bad" (27)—while he himself recollects that he could not "tell white people apart" (28).

Ajay undergoes the process of cultural hybridization despite his strong attachment to his original homeland, and it happens without him being aware of it. He is a vivid illustration of the argument that the process of identity formation is always in motion and never complete (Hall 1990, 222). His position is that of "in-betweenness," which, according to Bhabha, marks the emergence of a new identity in situations of intercultural contact and therefore cannot be fixed or "pure," because cultures interacting with one another create identities that are constantly transforming (2004, 56). At the same time, Ajay does not seem to be a content participant in either of the two cultures, but rather his feelings of estrangement and alienation are pervasive. After just two years in the US, he has already straddled the two cultures, even though because of his young age—he is only ten—he may be unaware of it. The scene of him at prayer reveals his transforming consciousness. Ajay did not believe in God before, but now starts to pray for Birju's health. Interestingly, despite his visual familiarity

with Hindu deities—the family has an image of Kali Ma placed on the altar at their home, “danc[ing] on a postcard, sticking out her tongue and waving her many swords and daggers” (Sharma [2014] 2015, 50)—the boy creates his own vision of God for the purpose of his conversations—“God looked like Clark Kent. He was wearing a grey cardigan and slacks. He sat cross-legged at the foot of the mat. Originally, right after the accident when I first started talking to him, God had looked like Krishna. But it had felt foolish to discuss brain damage with someone who was blue and was holding a flute and had a peacock feather in his hair” (51). The whole scene is revelatory about Ajay’s cultural hybridization. God’s image is Westernized as a result of Ajay’s growing integration into US culture. A suitable vision of a deity seems to be the alter ego of a US cultural icon, Superman, who acts very “American” when he says, “I’m flexible” or “I’m not too caught up in formalities” (52), and shows himself to be tolerant towards Ajay’s traditional Indian gestures.

The interdependence of various factors influencing the narrator’s identity transpires from his focus on improving his writing skills and choosing Ernest Hemingway as his literary master. The choice of Hemingway may be explained as emerging from the intersection of factors connected with ethnicity, race, class and disability. Firstly, it is possible to observe here that Ajay’s ethnic and racial identities are configured by the US system of education, a powerful tool of identity formation, particularly for ethnic minorities. At this point—Ajay’s school years—the novel reflects on the reality of the 1970s, when the US literary canon was still dominated by white male writers. Nevertheless, changes were signaled and expected—after a decade of social movements for civil rights, calls were being made to make curricula, syllabi and reading lists more inclusive and therefore more accurately representative of the cultural diversity of the US population (Bona and Maini 2006a, 6-7). Accordingly, Ajay’s choice of a canonical white US writer as a literary master is simultaneously a sign of his integration into US culture and of cultural erasure. The boy recollects then how, when writing stories for English classes, they “had all been about white people, because white people’s stories seemed to matter more. Also, I hadn’t known how to write about Indians” (150)—for example, how to explain the complex family relations in an Indian family. One can notice the feeling of inferiority in this confession; as a nonwhite immigrant, Ajay feels a less significant subject in the fabric of US society, which at that time still promoted the idea of the white mainstream. Furthermore, the community of South Asians, including Indians, was still relatively new—albeit “one of the fastest-growing Asian American communities” (Shankar and Srikanth 1998a, 1)—since their immigration was only made possible after 1965, when the US opened its gates with the Hart-Celler Act.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, they were not a distinct ethnic group but were subsumed under the rubric of “Asian Americans.” In

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<sup>2</sup> The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, also known as Hart-Celler Act, liberalized immigration regulations. It established a new immigration policy based on reuniting immigrant families and attracting skilled workers to the US. Simultaneously, it opened US borders to non-European immigration—immigrants entering the US under the new legislation came increasingly from countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

university curricula, South Asian Americans tended to be underrepresented in literature courses, even after novels by South Asian writers and anthologies of their work began to be published in the 1990s (Shankar and Srikanth 1998a, 9-10).

A wish to distance from his ethnic roots and the dream of economic stability are interwoven in Ajay's negotiation of cultural identity. He craves distance from the Indian way of educating children when abroad and, by extension, from the Indian lifestyle: "I thought about how wonderful it would be to be a writer and get attention and get to travel and not have to be a doctor or an engineer" (143-44). On the one hand, he does not want to conform to the stereotypes of the professions considered most desirable by and for immigrant Indians, while on the other, he wants to count on decent financial gratification, which he idealistically connects not so much with the writing profession as with Hemingway's popularity and mobility. Money is essential for Ajay for two reasons. As an immigrant, he aspires to fulfill the American Dream of a better life and thus attain the goal that brought his parents to the US. But also, money is perhaps most important because of the circumstances in which his family has found itself. Taking care of Birju is not only expensive, but also leads to an irregular income after the mother resigns from her job and the father becomes unemployed. Ajay believes that money would solve many of the family's problems.

Sharma alternates the images of Ajay's unbelonging and estrangement with those of integration into US culture in order to create a sense of the narrator's confused identity and the chaos he experiences. One reflection of his confusion is his changing attitude to writing. Although the effort he puts into imitating Hemingway is well rewarded and Ajay wins a place at Princeton University on the basis of a short story, he decides to try and fit into the traditional Indian expectations as regards the solid career path and salary and chooses to major in economics in order to become an investment banker. When searching for the causes of the chaos, it can be argued that Ajay's feeling of estrangement is reinforced by Birju's impairment. The fact that his brother's condition makes the whole family different has a debilitating effect on Ajay's sense of home, comfort and security. As a schoolboy, he discovers that a way of finding relief from this exhausting situation is to tell stories about Birju that, in one way or another, expose his otherness. At the same time, however, the stories contribute to his further estrangement. Ajay at first finds consolation in creating fantasies about his brother where he exaggerates Birju's achievements and shows him not as an ordinary boy but someone special, different—"Birju [...] had rescued a woman trapped in a burning car" (96), "Birju solved a math problem that professors hadn't been able to solve for years" (96). Later, Ajay turns to speaking the truth and this becomes his source of power, as if he realized that his family's real life is sufficiently different to overwhelm his classmates—"speaking the truth made me feel powerful" (101), "to say the horrible truth and to know that I had seen unbearable things, made me feel that I was strong and Michael was weak" (102). Both strategies can in fact be interpreted as attempts to control otherness; to gain, albeit momentarily, the upper hand over the disorder

that in fact controls the life of the entire family. Although telling stories gives Ajay a temporary sense of comfort, it does not help him feel included in any group but rather maintains the distance he feels from his classmates.

The narrator's suspension between cultures, his inability to confirm his belonging to one place and continuous feeling of estrangement, reinforced by the family's otherness due to Birju's impairment, may be accurately described by reference to the notion of *unhomeliness*. Bhabha defines unhomeliness as "the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world," "the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations" (2004, 13). Ajay's unhomey life is exposed when after several years spent in the US he still positions himself as a stranger that does not consider the US his home. When his parents are looking for a new place to live, Ajay, significantly, envisions the houses they visit as strange and, moreover, positions himself as other in relation to their former residents. The racial difference manifested by skin color is especially problematic for him: "it was strange to go into bathrooms and to think that a *white* man had stood in the tub, that the dirt and smell of meat that had covered the *white* man had been rinsed into the tub. It was strange to walk on carpets and to think that the bare feet of *white* people had walked over them" (89; italics added). Ajay's feeling of unhomeliness does not decrease with time. Despite his father's earlier efforts to make the US their home, the wish to purchase a house makes Ajay "disturbed" at the "sudden realization that probably [they] would never go back to India, that probably [they] would live in America forever" (90). Even though his transforming consciousness, and therefore his cultural hybridization, can be observed by the reader—for instance, when he creates his own image of God—Ajay is still unwilling to identify "America" with his home. Even as a young adult, he maintains the attitude of positioning himself as different. Recollecting his time in college, Ajay remembers his adverse stance to white Americans: "I automatically discounted anything a white person said. How would a white know what was true or real? I also felt jealous of white people" (206). A sense of being on the fringes of US society is present in these words, which highlight his perception of his racial otherness and could perhaps be read as signaling his regret at not being included in the mainstream. His personal experience may be connected with a wider arena of political and cultural forces at play, which is exactly how Bhabha explains the concept of unhomeliness: "The unhomey moment relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence" (2004, 15). Discussing Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Bhabha writes that the eponymous character "is a daemonic, belated repetition of the violent history of black infant deaths, during slavery, in many parts of the South" (2004, 15). In a similar vein, Ajay's experience of unbelonging can be considered an expression of the history of Indian immigrants, nonwhite people that could not develop their own sense of home due to their exclusion from the white American mainstream. On the other hand, it is possible to speculate that the narrator's sense of estrangement might perhaps be weaker if it were not reinforced by the difference that originates from the family's participation in the experience of Birju's disability.

#### 4. *FAMILY LIFE* AS CHAOS NARRATIVE

As mentioned earlier, Sharma's *Family Life*, as an illness narrative, may fruitfully be read in the light of what Frank calls "chaos narrative" (1997, 97-114). The chaos experienced by the narrator is an expression of his illness, never diagnosed or named in the narrative. The novel foregrounds a sense of a world falling apart without any prospect for betterment, where "troubles go all the way down to bottomless depths" (Frank 1997, 99), as well as a sense of lack of control over life "complemented by medicine's inability to control the disease" (Frank 1997, 100). A vision of collapse and despair transpires from this autobiographical novel, even though Sharma claims that he actually tried to leave either out of the narrative. "The constant despair of living with someone ill, of having no hope" was Sharma's reality, which contributed largely to his formation, because, as he confesses, "the gravitational pull of that was the most important aspect of my childhood and youth" (2014b). In his essay "A Novel like a Rocket," the author reveals that writing *Family Life* was "hard for emotional reasons" and "to go back and relive the events was awful" (2014c). The fact that he was writing the novel for about twelve years and a half, during which time he composed seven thousand pages—out of which only about two hundred have remained as the published text—may indicate that it was not only the narrative form he had to struggle with, but also making sense of his experience, which suggests Ajay's incomplete route to recovery is also the author's.

The ending of the novel points to the difficulties attendant on overcoming the chaos—or illness—in the narrator's life, despite the external signs of recovery manifested by his success and apparent life harmony. Ajay shows himself as a successful, self-made man, whose salary is much higher than the average, so he can easily support his parents and brother, as well as establish his own family. After initial problems, he eventually creates a satisfactory relationship and for a moment finds himself at peace: "I had a strange sense of everything being in its place. [...] The happiness was almost heavy" (210). Yet, just when the reader eventually expects some kind of relief from the painfully burdensome situation, the character's last words—"That was when I knew I had a problem" (210)—undermine any idea of consolation or satisfactory closure. The narrator realizes that a state of balance has not been achieved and that order has not yet begun to rule in his life. His words bear a striking resemblance to the words of a traumatized person discussed by Frank in connection with chaos narratives. Frank examines the response he received from a Holocaust witness asked about the experience of liberation from the concentration camp: "Then I knew my troubles were *really* about to begin" (1997, 106; italics in the original). As Frank argues, this unusual response indicates that for Holocaust witnesses, liberation did not necessarily mean the end of the horror or "any great dividing line that order[ed] their experience" (105). Consequently, he draws the conclusion that a chaos narrative does not have to transform easily into a narrative of recovery and that there may be people who "reject restitution in [their] desire to climb back into darkness" (107). Similarly, and without implying an

equivalence between the levels of trauma in both accounts, Sharma's protagonist's last words can be interpreted both as signaling a realization of the problem he has had for a long time and as a confirmation of the difficulty—or fear—of beginning to recover. This reading underscores Ajay's illness and its continuation, and is therefore quite different from Hager Ben Driss's, according to which the narrator's closing statement works as a modernist open ending and, thus, an indication of a new beginning (2017, 12).

Sharma's novel exposes the chaos and, at the same time, is an attempt to control it. In this sense, creating a narrative appears to be a therapeutic act. Frank claims that telling a story is a cure, a way of finding integrity, a place in life, an identity: "Stories have to repair the damage that illness has done to the ill person's sense of where she is in life, and where she may be going. Stories are a way of redrawing maps and finding new destinations" (1997, 53). The act of composing the narrative is in itself a sign of a capacity to gain distance from illness and find a reflective grasp of one's life: "Where life can be given narrative order, chaos is already at bay" (1997, 105). In *Family Life*, the chaos pervading the storyteller's life seems already contained and subject to reflection, by the very reason of its having been given a narrative form that, moreover, is retrospective, which enhances the sense of control over past events. However, as has been shown, the novel's ending does not give a clear indication of the narrator's restored integrity and emotional balance, and therefore cannot be described as a triumph over an illness.

##### 5. AGAINST THE NARRATIVE OF TRIUMPH

The question emerges, then, as to why Sharma in *Family Life* resists the cultural expectation of the narrative of triumph. US culture is often described as one that insists on optimism in the face of adversity, hides suffering, physical weakness or imperfection, while it celebrates overcoming difficulties and generally demands that a story end well (Conway 2013, 17-24). In line with this thinking is Frank's observation that the "restitution narrative"—the type of narrative that emphasizes recovery—is the most pervasive narrative form in US popular culture, delivered in television commercials, magazine advertisements and hospital brochures (1997, 79-80). When Kathlyn Conway writes in her research on illness memoirs that "by subscribing so insistently to the narrative of triumph, we participate in a hysterical denial, as if by chanting 'triumph' we can ward off mortality" (2013, 18), she is pointing to the long-held belief that US culture values progress, science and success, while it denies any kind of failure and ultimately death (Stephenson 1985, 32-34).

In *Family Life*, on the one hand, the story showcases the protagonist's economic and social success, but on the other, it points to his failure in achieving psychic stability and integrity. The narrator finishes his account with a sense of disorder, with a "problem" as his last words indicate. A possible explanation as to why he chooses not to emphasize his success may be found in Conway's research. She notes that most illness memoirs follow

a restitution plot line where the narrator is healed physically or mentally, and draws attention to the pitfalls of this type of representation, since it may lead to the damage done to the ill person being disregarded: “While many who are ill or disabled display enormous reserves of strength, an insistence on resiliency often becomes a way to ignore the devastation and even collapse endured by many” (Conway 2013, 45). Accordingly, Sharma’s goal at the end of the novel seems to be to focus readers’ attention on the sense of wreckage experienced on the personal level and the ruin encompassing many aspects of the life of the family—their expectations, internal bonds as well as outside relationships, psychic integrity, economic status and cultural positioning. What is more, it is the broader difficult history of Indian immigration that requires attention. Struggling with his illness, Sharma’s narrator is a “witness” rather than a survivor, in Frank’s terms; as such, he passes on an unwanted truth, “unrecognized or suppressed” (Frank 1997, 137)—namely, a story of a personal struggle with adversity that is devoid of an unequivocal sense of achievement. Instead, its final focus is on loss and failure, two experiences that are particularly unwelcome in US triumph culture. Furthermore, it can be also read as an indictment of a system that should develop better mechanisms of support for the vulnerable, such as nonwhite immigrants who are disabled or ill.

Sharma’s *Family Life* is an extremely sensitive, nuanced picture of immigrant concerns combined with disability and illness. The novel encourages readers to look at the process of immigrant identity (trans)formation as happening at the intersection of ethnicity, race, cultural belonging and ability status. It demonstrates how these factors are interwoven and create an experience of oppression and suffering for the whole family. Although the novel focuses primarily on the intimate experience of a family and shines a light on personal devastation and pain, at the same time it offers insights into cultural attitudes to disability and illness, as well as into the social and cultural reality of Indian immigrants in the US.

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