



## The Shifting Sands of Identity: Analysis How of How Caregiving Responsibilities Reshape Identities in Akhil Sharma's Family Life

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**Abstract:** A family, as a social structure, influences the person an individual ultimately becomes. The dynamics within a family are influenced by factors such as age, gender, and relationships. When a catastrophic event occurs within the family, it can significantly alter their entire dynamic within the family. Moreover, if such an incident results in one member becoming fully reliant on others for support and care, substantial adjustments are needed to be made. This can demand major and minor changes in the life of family members.

The caregiving duties for a disabled or ill family member transform both individual and collective identities of family members. This reshapes the dynamics between family members and the dependent person. The proposed study analyzes this change in family dynamics and its impact on identity formation in Akhil Sharma's novel 'Family Life'.

**Keywords:** Family dynamics, Identity formation, Caregiving, Dependency, Trauma and family structure, Akhil Sharma, Family

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### Introduction:

The Britannica dictionary defines a Family as a "A group of persons united by the ties of marriage, blood, or adoption, constituting a single household and interacting with each other in their respective social positions, usually those of spouses, parents, children, and siblings."<sup>1</sup> Thus generally families are composed of parents, children and grandparents. Often Indian families are 'joint' families which also include uncles, aunts, cousins and various other relations staying in one home. Despite having similar generic compositions, every family tends to be very unique from each other. Leo Tolstoy opens his famous novel 'Anna Karenina' with these insightful lines about families:

"All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way," (Tolstoy 07)

A family plays a major role in shaping an individual. Various dynamics such as age, gender, and relationships contribute to it. If a catastrophic event results in one member becoming fully reliant on others for support, substantial adjustments are needed to be made. This can demand minor and major changes in the life of family members who become their caregivers.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/family-kinship>



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person. The proposed study analyses this change in family dynamics and its impact on identity formation in Akhil Sharma's novel '*Family Life*' (2014).

### **Aim of the Study:**

This paper aims to explore how caregiving responsibilities can alter interpersonal relationships among family members. It focuses on how these alterations affect identities of the family members. This has especially been studied in the context of Akhil Sharma's popular novel '*Family Life*'.

### **Method:**

This study uses the novel '*Family Life*' by Akhil Sharma to analyse the changes in familial relationships when full time caregiving situations arise for a family member. For this the study uses a qualitative textual analysis, primarily through close reading of the novel.

The study looks into how gender, age class, geographical area, etc affect the memory, trauma and identity of caregiving persons. It studies how life changing events for one family member can also become a pivotal event for others related to them. It also studies the characters and their development before and after the life altering 'incident', in the context of the narrative structure, themes, language and time. The study has been approached through a feminist lens. The study also draws upon the Bowen's Theory of Family Systems, the Symbolic Interaction Theory etc to study the interpersonal dynamics of family members and its impact on identity formation of individuals.

### **Caregiving and its impact on Identity:**

Identity is not static; it is shaped by personal thoughts, actions and social interactions. Some identities are associated with an individual de facto by birth while some of them are associated with an individual when they choose to execute a role in the society. De facto roles assigned to an individual are that of a son, daughter, husband, wife, citizen etc. While chosen roles may be related to a job, an industry or a hobby - e.g. a doctor, teacher, dancer etc. Each role comes with socially mandated roles and responsibilities. While performing these roles and responsibilities individuals begin to identify themselves with the social conventions associated with them. The emotions that one feels during this process helps them build perception towards their social surroundings. This in turn helps the process of personality development and identity formation. Thus, as an individual keeps taking on new roles they add newer dimensions to their personality. When these dimensions are endorsed by society an individual tends to take these roles up as their identity. The more affirmation an individual receives for performing a role the more it becomes a part of her individual personality.

Sheldon Stryker elucidates in the same in his essay Symbolic Interactionist Theories of Identity with the following words:

"This congruence (between internal self-identity and external social validation) increases commitment because individuals come to see their identities as depending on the continued willingness of others to confirm their identities."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Symbolic-Interactionist Theories of Identity" within the volume Contemporary Sociological Theory (edited by George Ritzer et al.), published by SAGE



The shift in identities can be studied in the role of caregiving. Caregiving is a chosen role that an individual takes on, especially for their loved ones. The intensity of need in caregiving varies from case to case. The role is hardest for the caregivers of the patients who are totally or permanently incapacitated.

Oftentimes while taking on caregiving responsibilities the caregiver is not fully aware of the extent of the physical and mental toll that this job comes with. After taking responsibility it might become difficult for the caregiver to back out of their role, especially when they are hailed in the society as a responsible son/daughter/spouse/sibling.

Caregiving for a family is often stereotyped. Society has preset views to look at those who provide care for close family members. Some of the tropes associated with caregivers are:

- **Admiration:** Caregivers are often admired by friends and family. They receive constant praise for their selfless service. They are constantly admired for their strength, resilience, strong character etc.
- **Sympathy:** Along with admiration many caregivers receive sympathy or empathy from others. There is a constant comparison between the caregiver's situation and another person's situation.
- **Pity:** Many pity the caregivers' situations in front of them or behind their backs.

This greatly affects the caregiver for whom caregiving becomes a major part of their life. Some of the major emotions faced by caregivers are:

- **Love:** Caregivers, especially feel deep love and attachment towards the family member who is in their care. Many feel satisfaction by providing good care for their loved ones.
- **Hope:** Caregivers rely on hope that the patient's condition improves and they will be free of these duties to resume their previous lives again.
- **Guilt and Frustration:** Many caregivers feel guilt as they subconsciously compare themselves to the person they care for. Oftentimes it also leads to frustration as they find themselves to be helpless. These situations may also lead to anger and anxiety issues.
- **Burnout:** Caregiving, especially for bedridden patients is an exhausting activity. It is physically and emotionally taxing work. Thus caregivers often feel burned out. It may be due to stress, depression or even lack of proper rest.

For Indian's, caregiving has a major cultural significance. Caregiving for elderly, disabled or specially abled parents, siblings or spouses is considered as a dharmic duty or religious duty. Those who take up caregiving services are honored with high moral qualities and looked up to in society. Many Indians also become caregivers due to lack of economical and infrastructure assistance.

Through the novel '*Family Life*' by Akhil Sharma we can study the phenomenon of how identities shift when caregiving responsibilities become the center of life for a family.

In the book we see when an individual starts to strongly identify with caregiving activities, when it becomes an important aspect of their life, their individual and social identities are shaped around it. In these situations, carers adjust to their new tasks and obligations by changing who they are to conform to their new identities.

## **Overview of Interpersonal Relationships before the 'Incident':**



In the novel, the protagonist Ajay comes from a middle class family of Delhi. The small family consists of a husband, wife and two sons. On the face of it, they are like any other family in their neighborhood. However a close look reflects on a different dynamic in their familial relationships.

Since the beginning of the novel, the father has been absent for a year. The mother has been in charge of the house and the upbringing of the children, in which she does a fantastic job. The children look up to her as a parent. Even before leaving the father was not a very active parent to the children. Our protagonist says:

“I used to think that my father had been assigned to us by the government. This was because he appeared to serve no purpose. When he got home in the evening, all he did was sit in his chair in the living room, drink tea, and read the paper. Often he looked angry. By the time we left for America, I knew that the government had not sent him to live with us. Still, I continued to think he served no purpose. Also, I found him frightening.” (Sharma 19)

These lines clearly show that, as a parent the father was not actively involved in the children's lives. Thus his absence also did not matter to them. Thus the mother and children enjoyed a closer bond.

However, immigrating to America changed the dynamics in the family. In India, the mother was the decision maker in the family and the children followed her. In America, the mother was not familiar with the way of life and thus the father was responsible to make decisions for the family. Thus, the family dynamic transitioned from being mother-led to father-led. This shows us how power centers influence family relationships.

The relationship between the siblings is a loving one. The protagonist is the younger sibling and we see the elder one through his lens. Birju, the older sibling is shown to be smart, funny and popular both with parents and friends. This becomes the cause of jealousy for our young protagonist who perceives himself in the shadows of his older brother. Thus we see that the protagonist and his elder brother have a bittersweet relationship, like any usual sibling relationship. In terms of family expectations, Birju automatically becomes the ‘responsible one’ and Ajay becomes the ‘baby’ of the family. This assigned identity affects their self worth and influences the relationships among family members.

As a part of middle class society, the Mishra family is respected in the society. They are ideal citizens of the society. However their immigrant status increases their status among the society. When they move to America, their status is restored to the middle class again. The family banks their hopes on the possibility that Birju’s reputation as an immigrant child in a prestigious school might raise their status among their peers again.

### **Overview of Interpersonal Relationships after the ‘Incident’:**

The Mishra family faces life altering consequences in the form of Birju’s accident. He is left brain dead and totally dependent on the family. This changes the trajectory of life for all the members of the Mishra family which had come to America to build their lives, however the accident changed their entire future in an unexpected way. Caregiving became a major aspect of their life. This had a huge impact on their personalities and the interpersonal relationships among the family members.

Each member of the family dealt with the consequences of the incident in their own way. This in turn affected the other members of the house.

The mother, who until the accident was a working woman, had to give up her job to become a full time carer for Birju. She took it upon herself to make sure that her son is well cared for and



makes a full recovery. For this, despite being a science teacher she was ready to try quacks and alternative treatments for Birju. Thus her dreams and hopes were often left disillusioned and broken.

After the accident the father became the sole breadwinner of the family. He faced immense pressure to provide for the family financially. He was also responsible for the legal fight for the compensation from the accident, which was crucial for their stability. Unlike his wife he did not feel hopeful and was dejected about the way things turned out. To cope with the stress and pressure we see he relied on alcohol and eventually became an alcoholic.

Additionally, the conflicting attitudes among the couple led to clashes between them. Thus the home now had constant fights. It not only negatively affected their relationship but also their son Ajay, who was often a witness to these fights.

The younger brother, our protagonist, who was just a child when the accident occurred also faces multiple emotional conflicts. We have a better window to his emotions as the story is narrated through his perspective. As a child he felt scared. Eventually this fear turned into resentment at times and at times in anger. In the long term, due to the environment of the house that he grew up in, these feelings turned into guilt. This guilt reflects in all aspects of his life. He feels guilty of surviving, of not being able to help his parents and guilt etc. We see that guilt affects him in other relationships of his life, be it with his parents, or enjoying with friends like a teenager, having a girlfriend etc.

Thus we see caregiving responsibilities take a huge toll physically and mentally on the members of the household. It leaves lifelong trauma among the members of the family. Without adequate resources to heal from this traumatic incident the family members rely on the scarce coping mechanisms within their reach.

### **Analyses of Shift in Identities:**

From the beginning, especially in India, the Mishra family can be called a happy family. There are no major conflicts among them as a family. The parents share a healthy relationship like any other typical Indian family. The brothers also share a loving bond. This allows them to develop as individuals. They each have unique personalities. They have their own likes and interests, hobbies and social circles. The father is the gloomy scientific man, the mother is the homely smart teacher, Birju is the bright child with a great future and at the time our protagonist is the baby of the family trying to crave his own independent identity. They do not depend on other family members to make sense of their 'self'.

A healthy home environment helps the boys to develop into their individual personalities freely. However even as children they understand that a new identity of a future NRI changes their status in the society and we see an almost immediate shift in their personalities due to it. After their immigration to America, a new society and way of life demands a new dimension to their personalities. This in turn reflects in their identities as individuals and family. In America they are unfamiliar with the society. Exploring and navigating a new country brings them closer as a family. Individually also each member faces a shift in identities. Here the father becomes more assertive as compared to the mother. Birju also becomes the responsible older brother. In the bullying incident which our protagonist Ajay faces we also see that Birju was able to handle the transition to NRI lifestyle better than the other family members. We also see parents try to assert Birju Identity as a smart child with a promising future in the community. We see a direct impact of this on Birju's personality as his parents' expectations pressurize him to adapt to their expectations.



A change in the status can again be reflected in the personalities of the characters immediately. Thus Ajay who had become the bold leader again becomes less confident when placed in a new environment.

We can study a shift in the identities with the help of Bowen's Theory of Family Systems. This study analyses the patterns of relationships among family members and how it impacts them emotionally. According to Bowen's Theory of Family Systems the triangle is the: "building block or "molecule" of larger emotional systems because a triangle is the smallest stable relationship system."<sup>3</sup>

In relationships people navigate towards stability. More than one person in a relationship triangle creates tension among the

While Birju was fit, the triangle of the relationship system stabilized one way or another. During their time in India, the triangle was majorly formed between the mother, Birju and Ajay. The father largely remained out of the loop and thus subject to aloofness. In America the power triangle changed and the father replaced the mother. He was the decision maker here and thus the mother was pushed to the periphery.

After the accident, the triangle perpetually remains between the mother, father and Ajay. They have no point to release their interpersonal tensions and this gives rise to conflict in their interpersonal relationships. Thus each one looks into external factors to relieve themselves of these tensions. The mother clung to small hopes of recovery, the father became alcoholic to cope and Ajay tried to mix his home and personal life by becoming the 'hero-victim caretaker' brother.

However we see a shift in their interpersonal relationship, that took a positive one when the father tries to become sober. The efforts to stop drinking become the elephant in the room, the one that takes the stress and thus the three of them can again have a happy dynamic again.

This is however in a fragile state and very much dependent upon the existence of an external stress reliever present for them to have normal dynamics.

Thus the identities of the family members undergo a major shift due to caregiving responsibilities

## **Conclusion:**

Thus we see that external factors like caregiving can result in major shifts in identity of the caregivers. Caregiving duties not only change the perception of the society towards a person but also change the perception of an individual towards the society. Akhil Sharma in his novel 'Family Life' traces this change with sensitivity. Through this novel we can see multiple factors of society influence shifts in the identity for characters. Through his novel Sharma traces the shifting sands of identity especially when caregiving is at the center of a family's future.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.thebowncenter.org/triangles>



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