



## **Overcoming Life Hardships in Akhil Sharma's Novel *Family Life* (2014)**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this analysis is to expose the issue of overcoming life hardships in the novel *Family Life* (2014) by Akhil Sharma. The issue of overcoming life hardships refers to the types of life hardships that the immigrants face and efforts that the immigrants take to overcome the life hardships from the main character's perspective. This analysis looks on the hardships of all the characters inside the novel which are having brain-damaged family member and having alcoholic family member. The two efforts that the characters make to overcome the hardships are accepting the condition of brain-damaged family member and helping the alcoholic member to sober. This analysis is related to the concept of life instinct which proposed by Sigmund Freud. The use of the concept is based on the interpretation of text and context of the novel. This analysis also uses a lot of fictional devices such as character, plot, and setting to reveal the meaning. The result of the study shows that the characters have desire to solve their problems and they are also persistent and strong even though they find another problem to solve.

**Keywords:** hardships, immigrant, life instinct.

### **A. INTRODUCTION**

There are many ways for people to improve their quality of life. Immigration is one of the choices to accomplish this plan. Triandafyllidou defines immigration as the movement of usual residence to another country for at least a year in period and the people who move are defined as immigrant when their residency is changing across international borders (2016, p. 29). People immigrate to another country because of some reasons. Some of the immigrants move to another country because they want to have a better life,

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education, job, and economic status, but some others move to another country because they are forced to leave their own country due to war or politics for example. Physically, the immigrants have to face new surroundings where they must adjust to new types of weather, food, environment, working place, neighbourhood, and so on. Some may find it difficult to get used to eating new types of food. The differences that they face may cause the immigrants to become sick.

The immigrants may also face sudden changes in their health condition. Any accident may happen and the accident may lead the immigrant to become brain-damaged due to the brain injury. Brain injury is an acquired injury in the brain that is received during a person's lifetime (Headway, 2011). Having family member to become brain-damaged may lead the immigrants to the hardships they need to overcome. The immigrants may also become addicted to alcohol due to the feeling of stress, frustration, and depression that are caused by the problems in the new country. According to Littrell (2014, p.55), alcohol addiction or alcoholism is misused of alcohol drink that leads to problems mental and physical condition. The stress and associated disorder such as anxiety are the two key factors that may lead to the development of drinking alcohol and alcoholism as the consumption may reduce the feeling of life dissatisfaction (Monat et al, 2012, p.503). The alcohol addiction may also lead the immigrants to suffer mental illness due to the stress and anxiety because of the immigration.

The issue of the hardships that the immigrant's family member needs to overcome is not only seen in real life, but also in a literary work. There is one novel entitled *Family Life* written by Akhil Sharma published in 2014 that also contribute to expose this issue. The meaning of hardship shown in this story relates to the suffering that the characters as Indian immigrant has experienced in way of living a new life in United States. It focuses on the hardships that caused by the physically and mentally changes in family condition that caused by immigration and unexpected accident after immigrating.

This research focuses on the efforts that the family member makes to overcome the hardships. The types of hardship that will be talked in this study are having brain-damaged family member and having alcoholic family member. The biggest hardship that the characters have to overcome is having brain-damaged family member. They have to overcome the feeling of shock, trauma, and disappointment that are caused by his condition of being brain-damaged. They also need to face the hardship caused by the family member who become alcoholic. The efforts that the characters make to overcome the problem are accepting the condition of brain-damaged family member and supporting the alcoholic family member to sober.

## **B. RESEARCH METHOD**

The analysis of novel *Family Life* (2014) by Akhil Sharma is done through text and context based interpretation. It is done by analyzing fictional devices such as characters, plot (conflicts) and setting. These devices are connected to give contribution to reveal the meaning of the novel. The data is in

the forms of quotations taken from the source of data.

## C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the issue of overcoming hardships in Akhil Sharma's novel *Family Life* (2014). In this analysis, overcoming hardships refer to the efforts that the characters Ajay, Shiba, and Mishra do to overcome the hardships that they face in a new country. It explores the choices and efforts that they make to overcome the hardships and pursue the life that the family wants. This analysis uses fictional devices such as character, plot, conflict, and setting to reveal the meaning.

### 1. Types of Hardships that the Characters Face

The first thing to be analysed is the types of hardships which the characters inside the novel face after they move to United States. There are two types of hardships that will be talk in this study. The first hardship that the family needs to face is having brain-damaged family member soon after moving to a new destination country.

#### 1.1 Dealing with Brain-damaged Family Member

The first sub-topic to be analyzed is the problems caused by the unexpected accident that happens inside the family. Birju is being brain-damaged due to the accident. It can be seen on the following quotation,

“BIRJU HAD DIVED into the swimming pool. He had struck his head on the pool's cement bottom and lain there stunned for three minutes. Water had surged down his throat, been dragged into his lungs as he tried to breathe. His lungs had peeled away from the insides of his chest.”

From the quotation above it can be seen that Birju's hardship is more than the rest of the family member. He has an accident that every character is not expected. The accident occurred in the swimming pool area. This accident may happen because Birju is having more spirit than he actually has. He is just gotten accepted into the prestigious school that his family wants. He may become too happy from the acceptance and that makes him being more energetic during the vacation. He was drowning in the swimming pool for three minutes. The drowning makes his brain lacks oxygen that leads to the brain injury. He also becomes unconscious because of the injury. After he wakes up, he is no longer able to live his life normally like other people since the damage in his brain in severe. It is the highest level of intensity of brain injury.

Birju's condition is eventually not only difficult for himself, but it is also difficult for the other family member. It can be seen on the following quotation,

“Birju moaned, he yawned, he coughed, but even with his eyes open he

appeared to be dreaming. Birju responded to things. If there was a loud noise, he turned his head in the direction of the sound. Then he rolled his head back and just lay there. Often he smacked his lips and puffed spit. Occasionally he had a seizure. His teeth would clamp shut and squeak against each other. His body would stiffen, his waist rise off the bed, and the bed would begin to rattle. Seeing this frightened me. I would stand by the bed and look at him through the railings and wonder what to do.” (p. 30)

It can be explained from the quotation above that Birju is having severe effect due to the brain-damaged. He shows normal people reaction towards certain things such as moaning, yawning, and coughing. He only gives them signs that he actually feels something. These signs are probably uncontrollable too. It means that he can no longer speak to tell people about what he wants. He loses his brain function to speak. From the main character's perspective on the previous quotation, it can be seen that Birju is also having seizure. One of seizure's causes is trauma in brain area. A person who has seizure needs other people to help with the seizure. The utterance '*Seeing this frightened me. I would stand by the bed and look at him through the railings and wonder what to do.*' implied that it is very hard for the other family member because Birju's condition of being brain- damaged means that they have to help and take care of him. It is especially hard for the main character since he is only a child and he is not supposed to know what he has to do to help Birju as his brother. Birju's condition of being brain- damaged is the primary reason of the hardships that the rest of the family member needs to face and overcome.

#### 1.1.1. The Main Character's Stress

Birju's condition leads to the problems of the main character as the youngest son in the family. The accident that occurred creates a more life changing and hardship to the main character. It can be seen on the following quotation,

“My mother stopped in the doorway. She started to cry. I stood beside her, holding the duffel bag before me. I became angry with Birju for having created this problem.

Birju had a plastic mask over his mouth and nose, making him look like a fighter pilot. His eyes were wide open, as if in panic. He appeared to be staring up at some invisible thing and that thing was pressing down on his chest.” (p. 28)

From the quotation above, it can be seen that the main character's brother is getting into an accident that makes him hospitalized. The

utterance '*I became angry with Birju for having created this problem.*' shows that the main character feels emotional because of this accident. He is angry towards his brother because it makes the situation even harder for him. Ajay's perspective towards this accident implies that he blames his brother for the hardship that he has to face. He already has trouble understanding and accepting the new culture around him and now he has to face the fact that there is problem added because of his brother's accident.

The main character is also getting insult from his classmates, Michael and Jeff, because of the unfortunate accident that occurred and made his brother become brain-damaged. It can be seen from the following quotation,

"At lunch I sat down across from him and his best friend, Michael Bu, a Chinese boy with a round face and sharp little teeth like a fish. "Can your brother not talk at all," Michael asked, "or does he sound retarded?"

My face became hot. I had considered asking Jeff not to tell anyone about Birju, but it had seemed too much to ask. "Not at all." (p. 55)

From the quotation above it can be seen that the main character is getting insult from his classmates. His brother got into an accident that makes him brain-damaged. He tells Jeff about the condition of his brother and Jeff seems to be telling that to his friend, Michael Bu. It shows that the people around him are not considered him as their friend. The utterance "*Can your brother not talk at all,*" Michael asked, "*or does he sound retarded?*" shows the insult that they give to the main character's brother. They insult him so bluntly and that makes him feel embarrassed even though he does not mean to feel that way. This situation may make Ajay to feel sorry towards him because his story makes his brother accused as being retarded.

#### 1.1.2. The Mother's Hallucination

The next family member affected by Birju's condition is Shiba as the mother. The main character's mother is also having hardships after moving to America. First, she has the same hardship with the main character's father; disappointed over the condition of her son. She is shocked over the accident and the drastic changes in his son's mental and physical condition. It makes her become trauma. It can be seen on the following quotation,

"Time passed. One afternoon, I watched my mother

cut Birju's fingernails. She looked scared as she did this. She had his hand forced open and was trying to keep it from clenching. "Is it all right?" she asked him. I felt like I was dreaming." (p. 29)

From the quotation above it can be explained that the mother is shocked from the condition of her first son, Birju. Birju is not able to do anything except for blinking, breathing, and sleeping. It means that the mother is new for this situation. She is used to seeing Birju talk, play, study, and etc. Just like her husband, she is not prepared for this situation. The utterance '*One afternoon, I watched my mother cut Birju's fingernails. She looked scared as she did this. She had his hand forced open and was trying to keep it from clenching. "Is it all right?" she asked him.*' shows that she has no idea what she needs to do to help her brain-damaged and disabled son. She treats Birju extra carefully because she is afraid she may hurt him within his condition. It leads her to be frustrated and stressed about Birju's condition.

The tiredness and worries leads the mother to become a liar. She tells lie to other people. She tells other people that Birju is not brain-damaged but is in coma. It can be seen on the following quotation,

"My mother explained our situation to the pundit. "Birju is in a coma," she said, though Birju's eyes were open and he was not in a coma, but was brain damaged. "The doctors say that they don't know what can happen. He could wake tomorrow." I wondered why she was saying this. I guessed that it must be because people are more likely to help if they think there is hope. If there isn't any, they might try to avoid us, because who wants to be around someone depressing? "I go every morning to the nursing home. His father comes in the evening. I am so glad there is a temple in town." (p. 41)

From the quotation above it can be explained that the mother is having the similar hardship with the father. She is not able to accept her son's condition of not being able to function normally due to the brain-damaged. The mother knows that Birju's condition is helpless. She creates the lie about Birju being coma rather than brain-damaged because she is not able to accept Birju's condition. She is not only telling lie to make other people think that the family is not miserable, but she is also doing that to assuring herself that Birju will be healthy again. The utterance "*The doctors say that they don't know what can happen. He could wake tomorrow.*" shows that the mother is even lying about the doctor's diagnose of Birju. This lie is based on the mother's mindset of

not accepting her son's condition. It is implying that the mother is also becoming hallucinated due to the high stress that she feels because of taking care of her brain-damaged and disabled son. The hallucination may also be caused by the high and false hope that the mother has towards her son.

### 1.1.3. The Father's Depression

The last family member affected by Birju's condition is Mishra as the father of the family. He is the character inside the novel who is eager to move to United States. His hardships after his family joins him in United States are upon the accident that occurred to his other son who is also the main character's brother, Birju. The father's hardships are shown from the main character's point of view. The father is disappointed with the condition of his first son. He is not able to accept his recent condition. Birju was supposed to get into a prestigious school before the accident occurred. He was the pride of the family. The accident caused him to be brain-damaged that leads to disability. The father feels shocked and disappointed. It can be seen on the following quotation,

"My father was strange as always. Right after the accident, when he had first visited Birju, he had stood by the hospital bed, his face swollen and dark, his voice choked, and said, "Don't think I don't blame you. Don't think I don't know this is all your fault. What was in the pool? What was in there that you had to jump before anybody else got to it? Was there gold? Was there treasure?"

Since then, he had continued to say embarrassing things. Recently he had said that perhaps Birju had dived into the pool because of all the comic books he read, that Birju had thought he might gain superpowers by doing something like this." (p. 33)

From the quotation above it can be seen that the father is disappointed with the condition of his first son. Being brain-damaged and disabled is stopping Birju to go into the prestigious school and bring more pride to the family. The father as the head of the family is certainly feels disappointed. The utterance '*Right after the accident, when he had first visited Birju, he had stood by the hospital bed, his face swollen and dark, his voice choked, and said, "Don't think I don't blame you. Don't think I don't know this is all your fault. What was in the pool? What was in there that you had to jump before anybody else got to it? Was there gold? Was there treasure?"*' shows that the father blames Birju for this accident and the condition of the body that caused by the accident. Instead of trying to show his love more towards his first son, he decides to blame him and be disappointed of him. It means that the father has difficulty to accept the fact that now his son is brain-damaged and disabled. He also

continues saying some harsh words to the helpless Birju. It is also implied that he is frustrated with his first son's condition.

## 2. Dealing with Alcoholic Family Member

The family member who becomes alcoholic is the father. The father's disappointment over Birju's condition leads him into depression. Depression may cause feelings of terrible sadness and affect the father's interest to do activity in everyday life. Depression also affects the way someone acts another person, reacts to other people, and expresses their feeling.

### 2.1 Disconnection between Father and Son

The depression leads him to the alcohol as the way to relieve his stress. Even though he already finds cure for his stress, he still feels depressed. It can be seen on the following quotation,

“MY FATHER'S DRINKING worsened. The disorder that had been restricted primarily to weekend mornings spread into the week. Sometimes my father was too hungover in the morning to bathe Birju. He would lie on his bed in his pajamas, one foot touching the floor to keep the room from spinning. When this happened, I took on his role in bathing my brother. Standing in the tub, holding Birju up, rubbing him with soap, feeling his flabby chest, his stretched stomach, I would be moved to tears that we were not better people, that my poor brother was in need and we were not as good as we should be.” (p. 79)

Birju's condition is very hard for the father to accept. He is consumed by the alcohol to relieve his stress and depression. The utterance '*MY FATHER'S DRINKING worsened. The disorder that had been restricted primarily to weekend mornings spread into the week.*' shows that the father drinking's habit is a serious matter. The father has no idea that he is given a false pleasure from the alcohol. He ends up drinking alcohol everyday in order to make him forget the problem that he needs to face. From the quotation above, it can be revealed that the father is not doing his responsibility to help the other family member taking care of Birju. He neglects his responsibility due to the alcohol that he consumed. It also shows that the main character take his father's responsibility to take care of Birju. It makes the situation even harder for the main character. He has to deal with his brother's condition more. The quotation above also implies that the father may drink alcohol to secretly distance himself from seeing Birju and his brain- damaged condition and disability. Instead of making the father's feeling better, the alcohol reduces more his function and makes him lazy to do everyday activity. It is supported by the following quotation,



## 2.2 Disconnection between Wife and Husband

Birju's condition leads the father into having hardship in form of stress and depression that he fails to handle. It turns him into an alcoholic father and also alcoholic husband. His condition as an alcoholic husband eventually affects the wife's mental condition. It makes the situation harder for the main character's mother as the wife in the family. The alcohol disconnected the parents' relationship. It can be seen on the following quotation,

“Later, after perhaps ten days, my mother began to acknowledge that my father was drinking. First she was sarcastic. She muttered under her breath. “You are going to kill someone driving this way.” My father ignored her.

Then she became openly angry. Wet-eyed, she shouted at him. “You have a son like this, and what do you do? Drown yourself.”” (p. 41)

From the quotation above it can be explained that the mother did not believe her husband's drinking behavior. It is because the father is the head of the family. He has to be a strong figure to the family. When he fails to show the figure that the mother wants to be the example of the family, she feels hurt and disappointed because of it. The utterance ‘*First she was sarcastic.*’ means that she may not show her disappointment bluntly at first after realizing her husband drinking behavior, but she says some words to mock and insult her husband which is implying that she does not give approval to her husband's drinking behavior. She also mocks and insults him to make him realize that drinking is bad for him and drinking also may lead to another accident that will add his problems. The mother's action is not working because the father drinks alcohol to feel relieved from his stress and depression. The utterance ‘*Then she became openly angry. Wet-eyed, she shouted at him. “You have a son like this, and what do you do? Drown yourself.”*’ shows that the mother becomes frontal with her confrontation towards the father's drinking behavior. She reminds him about their son's condition. It is implying that she needs him to help her taking care of the brain- damaged son. From the main character's perspective, the mother appears ‘wet- eyed’ when she confronts him about her disapproval to his drinking behavior. It is implying that the mother is crying to show her frustration about him. It means that she becomes very stressed about the condition inside the family.

### 3. Efforts to Overcome the Hardship

The next topic to be analyzed is the efforts which the characters make to overcome the hardships. There are some efforts that the characters make. The first one is the accepting the hardships due to the condition of the brain-damaged family member.

#### 3.1 Accepting the Condition of Brain-damaged Family Member

Each character has different way to overcome their hardships that cause by the brain-damaged family member. Nevertheless, they have the same point of overcoming their hardships. They are accepting Birju's condition of being brain- damaged.

##### 3.1.1. The Main Character's Stress Relieve

The first effort that the main character, Ajay, makes to overcome his problem is by accepting his brother's condition and the stressful feeling that is caused by it. He changes the stressful feeling into the thing that stimulates him to release his stress. He does not blame his brother for the hardship that he feels anymore. The way he releases his stress is by interacting more with people. He tells his friend about his brain-damaged brother in hope that he may get sympathy from his friends. It can be seen on the following quotation,

“I sat back in my chair. I had decided to tell Jeff because I was so unhappy, because everything was terrible, and because I had thought that if I told him about Birju, he would pity me and become my friend. Now I had the feeling that I had wasted something.” (p. 54)

From the quotation above, it can be stated that the main character's first attempt to relieve his stress is by telling his friend, Jeff, about his brain-damaged brother. Rather than keeping his story and feeling in secret, he decides to share it with his friend in school. The main character thinks that by telling his friend, he may gain sympathy from Jeff. He also does that to make Jeff becomes his friend and he will have another person that he can talk to. By stating that he is unhappy and feel terrible about the family condition, the main character realizes that he needs to find a way to solve the stressful condition that he feels. It shows that the main character has effort to relieve his stress. Even though later he stated that he had wasted his time by telling people about his story, he still has intention to feel better by telling his story to other.

### 3.1.2 The Mother's Affectionate Behavior

The mother is overcoming the hardships by accepting Birju's condition of being brain-damaged. She struggles to take care of Birju and find cure to make him be normal again. It means that the mother is very strong will and persistent to help Birju. She is not considered Birju as a problem that she needs to forget and get rid of, but she is considered him as a person and human being that needs her help. It can be seen on the following quotation,

“My mother, who was standing behind my father's chair, would not let him say this unchallenged. “Whatever you say, I am happy I'm here to take care of my son. What if I were dead and there was nobody to care for Birju? Thank God I have breath in me so I can love him.”” (p. 42)

From the quotation above it can be stated that the mother's love towards her son is very strong. She is persistent to take care of him more than the other family member. The utterance “*Whatever you say, I am happy I'm here to take care of my son. What if I were dead and there was nobody to care for Birju? Thank God I have breath in me so I can love him.*” shows that the mother is careless about what other people say about her taking care of her son. The only thing that she cares is that she is healthy and able to take care of Birju. It also implies that the mother is accepting Birju's condition of being brain-damaged. The next thing she has to do is taking good care of Birju. It also means that she is a caring mother who looks after her brain-damaged son patiently and persistently. It proves that she has life instinct on her because she is persistent to solve her problem arousing her brain-damaged son and she is very adamant to be strong and healthy to take care of her son. Birju is becoming the source of the hardships that she needs to overcome, but at the same time also becoming the reason behind the motivation that she has to continue living for another day. She even thanks God that she still lives so that she can take care of him.

The father's disappointment over his son's condition of being brain-damaged is not stopping him from being a father. Even though he becomes stressed and depressed, he still struggles to get justice for Birju. The justice is in form of money compensation from the swimming pool and the building's company. The compensation helps the family to take care of Birju. The father is able to take care of the compensation so they are getting the good result from it. It can be seen on the following quotation,

““One Friday night in December, my father came home late. My mother was cooking dinner. He entered the apartment and leaned back against the gray metal door. He was smiling. He crossed a foot over a knee and began unlacing a boot.

“Do you have news?” my mother asked.  
“Yes,” my father said. He kept smiling.  
“Don’t say anything.”

My mother took a spoon, dug it into the sugar bowl that was on the counter, and passed it to him. My father put the heaped spoon in his mouth. The handle stuck out like a thermometer.

My mother said, “Now you can speak.”

My father removed the spoon. “Six hundred and eighteen thousand dollars.”” (p. 47)

From the quotation above it can be seen that the family is getting a huge amount of money as the compensation of Birju’s swimming pool accident. The father’s success attempt of getting the compensation shows that he has strong will to overcome the hardships due to Birju’s accident. His disappointment towards Birju affects his mental condition to become stressed and depressed that lead to him being an alcoholic father. That does not stopping him from doing his responsibility to get compensation for Birju. The family needs more money to take care of Birju. The compensation makes the family may solve their money problem to take care of Birju. It is corresponding to Freud’s life instinct concept. People who have desire to live their life will do anything to solve their problems. In this situation, the father’s ability to push away and ignore his disappointment that leads to depression and become alcoholic implies that he has life instinct.

### 3.1.3 Helping the Alcoholic Family Member to Sober

Birju’s condition leads the father as one of the family members to become depressed. This depression leads him to drink alcohol as the attempt to overcome his problems. He eventually becomes alcoholic.

### 3.1.4 The Father’s Self Rehabilitation

The father’s attempt to be sober is promising to Birju that he will not drink alcohol anymore. At this point, the father decides to stop drinking for the sake of his brain-damaged son. As one of the family member, he decides to help himself to be sober. It can be seen on the following quotation,

“My father put a hand on Birju’s head. He

swore on Birju's life that he would not drink. I saw this and thought I was watching some melodrama that my parents had concocted." (p. 97)

From the quotation above it can be seen that the father has decided to stop drinking for the sake of his brain-damaged son. It proves that he wants to change and to be better. The father realizes that alcohol gives him bad influence and he already wants to stop drinking. The quotation above also implies that the father has desire to live his life in a healthy way. Over drinking alcohol may impact the body function. It also may ruin the lungs condition. The father's decision to stop drinking also shows that he wants to live in a healthy way. He realizes that alcohol is a bad decision to relieve his stress and help him forget his problems.

### 3.1.5 Ajay and Mother's Being Supportive

The mother is also helping the father to stay sober. It is exposed when she tells the main character to accompany the father to AA meeting. It shows the supportive side of the mother and Ajay to help the father to stay sober. It can be seen on the following quotation,

"That evening, my father got ready to go to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, and so did I. My mother wanted me to accompany him so that he would not go somewhere and start drinking." (p. 106)

From the quotation above it can be exposed that the mother still keeps her eyes to her husband even though he is already discharged from the rehabilitation. The sentence 'My mother wanted me to accompany him so that he would not go somewhere and start drinking.' shows that the mother struggles to keep him sober while taking care of the brain-damaged Birju at home. She tells the main character to accompany the father so that the main character will be able to stop him start drinking again. It also makes the main character to be able to help his father to stay sober. It implies the mother's struggle to keep the family alive. It is one of the attempts that other family member do to overcome the hardships arousing the father's alcohol addiction.

## **D. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS**

In this analysis, the issue of overcoming hardships is reflected from the main character, the father, and also the mother's efforts and struggles to overcome the hardships. The novel shows that the types of hardships that the characters face are having brain-damaged family member and having alcoholic family member. The efforts that the characters take to overcome the problems are accepting the condition of the brain-damaged family member and having alcoholic family member. It can be seen that the characters have life instinct on them because they have desire to solve their problems and they also persistent and strong to

overcome their hardships. They never give up even though they encounter another problem to solve.

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