

The mishras' means
of coping in 'family
life'



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Akhil Sharma's novel *Family Life* is based on his life as part of an immigrant family and the struggles he and his family faced. Sharma, through the eyes of the narrator named Ajay, details the difficulty of assimilating into the United States after immigrating from India and focuses on the key differences that set Indian families apart from American ones. The strain placed on his family and their relationships with each other following his older brother Birju's accident in the United States is one of the main focal points of the novel. Birju dives head first into a swimming pool and becomes severely brain damaged, so much so that the family is forced to spend most of their time caring for him. Following Birju's accident, Ajay and his parents all find ways to escape reality: Shuba turns to faith and anger, Rajinder turns to alcohol, and Ajay desperately searches for acceptance and love from his peers.

Shuba utilizes her faith and her anger to cope with Birju's accident. Immediately after Birju is hospitalized, Shuba sets up an altar in his room and begins singing prayers and burning incense. She continues all throughout almost the entire night in hopes of quickening Birju's recovery (Sharma 53). After being in the hospital for a day, Shuba trims Birju's fingernails with care and talks to him as if he can respond (55). Similarly, she tells people that Birju is simply in a coma, allowing herself and others to feel hopeful that he will recover and be able to live a normal life (76). This demonstrates her state of denial in regards to Birju's condition; she believes what she wants to believe and denies the fact that he will likely never recover. Her denial shows that she is experiencing the stages of grief. As reality sets in and the level of care Birju requires drains Shuba, she picks

Shuba fights with people instead of remaining quiet as she used to. In one instance, Shuba yells at Rajinder for thanking a nurse's aide since she believes that this action will cause the staff to think he is weak and they will not provide the best care for Birju. Similarly, Shuba gets into regular "screaming matches with the hospital administrators" so Birju is not forced out of the nursing home (62). As the tension builds in the family and Rajinder's drinking gets worse, Shuba first remains silent about it then sarcastically comments on his problem and becomes openly angry (75). Another example of her anger is displayed when she finds Birju vomiting over the side of his bed due to an aide's recklessness. Shuba yells at the aide, berating her and demanding to know what to do next to ensure Birju is okay (90). By lashing out at others, Shuba is able to express the anger she feels toward the situation she and her family are experiencing.

Shuba begins desperately turning to miracle cures and healers who come to offer their services. They claim they will be able to cure and awaken Birju, and Shuba allows them to attempt their supposed miracle cures. The first is Mr. Mehta, who begins coming to the house. He would arrive at nine in the morning and start his ministrations by "flinging a saffron-colored sheet... printed with oms and swastikas" over Birju, kneel by the bedside and pray for fifteen minutes. He would then take each of Birju's limbs individually out from beneath the blanket and rub them until the hairs stood on end, and then would "clap [his hands] to Birju's ears [and] cry, 'Aum namah Shivaya'" (121). Ajay remembers seeing Mr. Mehta as strange and quickly has the shocking realization that his mother is actually taking Mr. Mehta seriously. Her unrelenting belief in faith may be seen as healthy at first, but

she quickly spirals; there is nothing else that will bring her solace and she tricks herself into believing that Birju's condition could miraculously change for the better. This scene along with the many other miracle workers she allows into her house displays how desperate Shuba is to try any and every cure, showing her reliance and obsession with faith. Soon after, she also lashes out at Ajay and stops paying as much attention to him, since she is focusing all her time and energy on Birju. According to Ajay, some of the first memorable occasions where she got mad at him were when she " screamed at [him] if she caught [him] reading in the bathroom" and when " she accused [him] of avoiding" Birju. Ajay begins getting " the sense that [Shuba] disliked [him, but tolerated him] in the house because it was her duty" (149).

In the time after Birju's accident, Ajay's father Rajinder turns to alcohol to cope with their situation. However, Rajinder first is in denial about Birju's state, just like Ajay's mother. Like Shuba, Rajinder talks to Birju like he can respond and can hear what his father is saying. He talks to Birju during the night and says what Ajay thinks are " embarrassing things" (61). Birju's true condition eventually becomes undeniable and Rajinder feels the need to escape reality. The first time Ajay sees his father drink is after Shuba tells Rajinder to leave and take Ajay with him. His father pulls over and stops at a bar, asking for the cheapest drink (67). Ajay recalls how his father began to get drunk every day, became bitter and depressed, and how he sat in front of the TV for hours on end and was almost always drunk (75). Drinking is clearly Rajinder's escape mechanism because it allows him to dissociate from the reality his situation. As his alcoholism worsens, he begins fighting

back and arguing with Shuba. They first fight about Rajinder's drinking and he says that Shuba is turning to religion so much because she can't accept that Birju is brain damaged and that he will not wake up (124). His drinking gets so bad that it is up to Ajay and Shuba to care for Birju alone. Ajay remembers that Rajinder drinks all night long and he continues to fight about his condition. He is almost always late for work, he often misses days of work so he can sleep in, and he stops caring about his obligations. It eventually gets so bad that he is put on probation at his job and he has to stop drinking or else he will be fired (176-179). Shuba and Ajay feel obligated to watch over Rajinder and help keep him from drinking. According to Ajay, his father swears on Birju's life that he will stop drinking, a promise which is soon broken. Although he stops drinking for a period of time, he disappears one night and relapses (183). He admits to Ajay that he drinking gives him "freedom [and] peace of mind, that he felt like he was surrounded by problems and [drinking plucks] him out from among them" (184). Soon after this relapse, Rajinder disappears again, but this time to check himself into a rehabilitation program at Bellevue Hospital. This shows that he recognizes that he has a problem and that he does value his family; it is a first step towards his recovery.

Ajay copes with the aftermath of Birju's accident by searching for acceptance and love from his family, then from his peers. Ajay first begins praying day and night with his mother and aunt, since that is what his mother and culture taught him to do. After some time, he begins communicating directly with God, or at least his version of God. Ajay recalls how he used to picture God as Clark Kent, and how he talked to God about his situation and what would

happen in the future. In one conversation, Ajay attempts to bargain with God, begging him to erase the three minutes Birju was underwater, to no avail (59). These two series of events and his decision to turn to religion first as a coping mechanism show that he is clearly influenced by his mother's strong belief in religion and faith and wishes to get validation and acceptance from her. Slowly, he loses motivation to pray, becomes bored with singing prayers, and loses faith, so he stops visiting Birju's hospital room and stops having conversations with God. This is when he realizes he has to find another way to cope with his feelings. Ajay confesses his friend Jeff about Birju's condition, then makes up lies to make his brother sound even better than he truly was. He recounts the extravagant lies he told, stories about how Birju beat up people who were bullying Ajay, how Birju became fluent in French in two weeks, and many more (103-109). This is just one of Ajay's desperate attempts to obtain validation from his classmates. The second time this occurs is when Ajay begins tenth grade. He first calls a girl named Rita and tells her he has a crush on her, that he thinks she's attractive, and he asks her on a date. She rejects him and Ajay immediately goes to find another girl. He pursues Minakshi, another girl in his grade who he does not find as attractive. He keeps whispering " I love you" and dropping love notes to her in the halls and during class until she finally notices him and they begin dating (168-169). He probably does this because he is not getting attention and affection at home, so he is forced to search for it elsewhere. His relationship makes him feel happy and gives him hope for the future for the first time, showing how this coping mechanism actually works for him, at least for a short time.

Although they each use their own coping mechanisms, each member of the family has similar coping mechanisms because they all are trying to escape or distract themselves from their reality. While Shuba utilizes her religion and anger to vent her emotions and lull herself into a false sense of security and hope, Rajinder drinks to escape from his reality, and Ajay searches for love and acceptance from people outside his family. Shuba's decision to turn to religion and anger show that she is more willing than Rajinder to accept various parts of her reality while avoiding others, while he wishes to simply avoid it all and distract himself from their situation. Ajay's coping mechanisms are similar to his parents' because he wishes to distract himself from a large portion of his reality: the fact that his parents' are not paying as much attention to him and the fact that his brother will likely never recover from his brain damage.