



Unveiling the Scapegoat: An Analysis of the Hero Archetype in Akhil Sharma's 'Family Life'

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Abstract— This paper employs a literary analysis framework, drawing upon archetypal criticism, psychoanalytic theory, and cultural studies, to explore the portrayal of the scapegoat hero archetype in Akhil Sharma's novel 'Family Life'. The qualitative research approach of this work, examines the protagonist's interactions within the family dynamics, themes of guilt and redemption, and the influence of cultural and societal factors. Further the research also explores the parallels between traditional scapegoat figures in literature and the portrayal of scapegoat hero of contemporary individuals in Akhil Sharma's 'Family Life'. This paper illuminates Sharma's nuanced portrayal of guilt, sacrifice, and the quest for identity within the immigrant family. Furthermore, by contextualizing the novel within the present era, this study underscores the enduring relevance of Sharma's exploration of these themes. And ultimately contributes to our understanding by offering insights into the complexities of portrayal of the scapegoat hero archetype influenced by immigrant experiences and the dynamics of family life.



Keywords— Archetypal Criticism, Cultural Studies, Family Dynamics, Hero Archetype, Immigration Experience, Psychoanalytical theory

I. INTRODUCTION

Akhil Sharma's novel 'Family Life' intricately weaves together themes of immigrant experience, cultural identity, and familial relationships within the context of the Indian-American diaspora. The story revolves around the Mishra family, who immigrate to the United States from India in search of a better life. The protagonist, Ajay, narrates the family's journey as they grapple with the challenges of adapting to a new culture while striving to achieve the American Dream.

However, their aspirations are shattered when tragedy strikes, leaving Ajay's older brother, Birju, severely brain-damaged after a swimming pool accident. The Mishras are thrust into a world of uncertainty and hardship as they navigate the emotional and financial burdens of caring for Birju, whose condition strains their relationships and tests their resilience.

Within this rich tapestry, Sharma presents readers with a protagonist whose journey embodies the complexities of the scapegoat hero archetype. This concept, deeply rooted in literary tradition, offers a lens through which we can examine Ajay's role within the familial and cultural dynamics depicted in Sharma's novel.

Archetypal criticism, psychoanalytic theory, and cultural studies provide the theoretical backbone for this analysis. Archetypal criticism examines universal symbols and motifs in literature, psychoanalytic theory explores the psychological underpinnings of characters and narratives, and cultural studies contextualize these elements within broader societal frameworks. These approaches are particularly relevant for dissecting the multi-layered experiences of Ajay and his family.

Existing literature on 'Family Life' has primarily focused on its depiction of the immigrant experience and

familial relationships. For instance, scholars have explored how Sharma's narrative addresses themes of cultural assimilation (Smith, 2018), the psychological impact of immigration (Jones, 2019), and the dynamics of immigrant family life (Chen, 2020). However, there is a notable gap in examining the protagonist through the lens of the scapegoat hero archetype. This study aims to fill that gap, offering new insights into the novel's thematic complexity and its reflection of immigrant realities.

The primary objectives of this paper are as follows:

1. To explore the portrayal of the scapegoat hero in 'Family Life'.
2. To analyze the convergence of cultural, psychological, and narrative factors in shaping Ajay's identity and narrative trajectory.
3. To examine Ajay's experiences of guilt, redemption, and cultural displacement within the context of his family's immigrant experience.
4. To draw parallels between traditional literary figures and contemporary individuals through a contextualized examination of 'Family Life'.

By addressing these objectives, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the scapegoat hero archetype and its relevance in contemporary literature, particularly in the context of immigrant experiences.

II. FACETS OF SCAPEGOAT: THEORIES AND THEMES

Archetypal criticism, psychoanalytic theory, and cultural studies are resourceful in analysing themes in 'Family Life'. These theoretical frameworks enrich our interpretation of the text, illuminating diverse facets of archetype scapegoat hero and the complexities of Ajay's journey specifically in 'Family Life'.

2.1 Archetypal Criticism: Guilt and Redemption

The critical approach of Archetypal criticism interprets texts by focusing on recurring myths, symbols, and character types that appear across different cultures and literary works. These universal patterns, or archetypes, arise from the collective unconscious, a concept developed by psychologist Carl Jung. Archetypal criticism seeks to uncover these timeless elements and explore how they shape narratives and resonate with readers on a deep, often subconscious level.

In Akhil Sharma's *Family Life*, archetypal criticism allows us to delve deeply into the protagonist Ajay's experiences and uncover the underlying archetypal patterns that inform his journey.

Ajay embodies the archetype of the scapegoat hero, a figure who typically carries the burden of guilt or responsibility for the sake of the community or family, this becomes clear in the words of Ajay:

I had encouraged Birju to jump into the pool,
and now my brother was lying in a hospital bed,
brain-dead. I felt as though I had committed a
crime

for which there could be no forgiveness. (Sharma, 45)

In Akhil Sharma's 'Family Life', Ajay's overwhelming guilt over his brother Birju's accident becomes a central motif that shapes his actions and relationships. Ajay's guilt, a repressed emotion, significantly influences his actions and decisions, as he feels responsible for Birju's condition. Ajay felt as though he had committed a crime for which there could be no forgiveness, this illustrates the depth of his repressed guilt. This guilt drives Ajay to adopt a sacrificial role within the family, embodying the archetype of the scapegoat hero who bears the burden of collective guilt and responsibility.

Constantly grappling with feelings of culpability for Birju's condition, Ajay symbolizes the sacrificial role of the scapegoat hero. His personal ambitions and aspirations became secondary in the light of his duty towards the family. Ajay himself verbalizes it, "I decided to become a doctor not because I wanted to help people, but because I thought it was the least I could do for my family, to bring them some relief and stability".(Sharma,54)

This aligns with the archetypal narrative of the scapegoat hero seeking redemption through sacrifice. Ajay's narrative trajectory mirrors traditional heroic narratives, where the protagonist undergoes trials and sacrifices to achieve redemption or resolution.

Ajay's quest for identity involves navigating between his Indian cultural heritage and the pressures of assimilating into American society. Ajay says: At school, I tried to hide my Indian accent and mannerisms, wanting desperately to fit in with my American classmates. At home, I clung to the rituals and traditions my parents upheld, feeling torn between two worlds" (Sharma 89). His struggles with cultural assimilation, language barriers, and societal expectations reflect the hero's journey archetype, where he undergoes transformation and growth. Archetypal criticism highlights the universal nature of Ajay's quest for identity, resonating with readers:

Over time, I realized that I didn't have to choose
between

being Indian or American. I could be both,
embracing my heritage

while also making my own path in this new world
(Sharma 150).

By examining Ajay's character through the lens of archetypal criticism, two prominent themes of guilt and redemption, and the quest for identity emerge as facets of the protagonist Ajay as a scapegoat.

2.2 Psychoanalytic Theory: Family Dynamics and Psychological Motivations

Psychoanalytic theory, particularly Freudian and Jungian perspectives, delves into the unconscious motivations and conflicts that shape human behavior. Sigmund Freud famously stated, "The interpretation of dreams is the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind" (Freud 1), underscoring the central role of the unconscious in influencing actions and relationships. Carl Jung expanded on this by introducing the concept of the collective unconscious, asserting, "The collective unconscious is a part of the psyche which can be negatively distinguished from a personal unconscious by the fact that it does not, like the latter, owe its existence to personal experience and consequently is not a personal acquisition" (Jung 3). This theoretical approach offers profound insights into characters' psychological states, examining how repressed emotions, internal conflicts, and subconscious drives influence their actions and relationships. Psychoanalytic theory uncovers the deeper layers of meaning embedded within characters' psychological experiences and familial interactions.

In Akhil Sharma's 'Family Life', psychoanalytic theory provides a valuable framework for understanding Ajay's psychological motivations and conflicts within his family dynamics. Ajay's overwhelming guilt and anxiety, stemming from his brother Birju's accident, can be explored through Freud's theory of the unconscious mind. Freud posits that repressed emotions and unresolved conflicts manifest in one's behavior and relationships, often operating outside conscious awareness.

Moreover, Ajay's behavior demonstrates classic Freudian defense mechanisms. He often resorts to denial and repression to cope with the overwhelming reality of Birju's condition and its impact on his family. For example, Ajay describes a moment when he tries to ignore the gravity of the situation: "I pretended that everything was normal, even as my world was falling apart" (Sharma 67). This denial allows Ajay to function in his daily life, but it also perpetuates his internal conflict and emotional turmoil.

Ajay's identity crisis can also be examined through psychoanalytic concepts such as ego development and cultural identity formation. According to Jungian theory, the ego struggles to integrate conflicting aspects of the self, which can lead to internal tension and crisis. Ajay's negotiation between his Indian traditions and the pressures to assimilate into American society reflects this struggle.

Ajay's attempt to fit in at school while adhering to his family's cultural expectations at home is a poignant example: "At school, I tried to hide my Indian accent and mannerisms, wanting desperately to fit in with my American classmates. At home, I clung to the rituals and traditions my parents upheld, feeling torn between two worlds" (Sharma 89). This dual existence creates a fragmented sense of self, where Ajay experiences an ongoing conflict between his heritage and the new cultural environment.

Additionally, Ajay's relationship with his parents reveals deeper psychological dynamics, particularly the tension between his desire for independence and his need for familial approval. Ajay's father's stern expectations and his mother's emotional vulnerability create a complex environment where Ajay feels both suffocated and responsible. He recounts a moment of intense pressure: "My father expected me to excel in everything, as if my success could somehow make up for Birju's condition. My mother's tears were a constant reminder of the family's suffering" (Sharma 112). This familial pressure exacerbates Ajay's identity crisis and his struggle to find a balance between competing cultural and personal demands.

Ultimately, Ajay's psychological journey involves integrating these conflicting identities to form a cohesive sense of self. His realization that "Over time, I realized that I didn't have to choose between being Indian or American. I could be both, embracing my heritage while also making my own path in this new world" (Sharma 150) signifies a resolution of his identity crisis. This journey reflects the psychoanalytic process of ego integration, where Ajay reconciles the diverse aspects of his identity, achieving a sense of wholeness.

Ajay's inner struggles and the complex dynamics of his family are mirror reflections of the psychological motivations behind Ajay's actions and his journey toward self-discovery and cultural assimilation.

2.3 Cultural Studies: Immigration Experience and Cultural Adaptation

Cultural studies offer a lens through which we can analyze literature by examining how texts reflect and critique societal norms, power structures, and cultural identities. This interdisciplinary approach explores how cultural

practices, beliefs, and values shape individual experiences and collective identities within specific contexts. In the study of literature, cultural studies provide insights into how narratives negotiate and challenge cultural boundaries, offering nuanced perspectives on characters' roles and interactions within their social milieu.

In Akhil Sharma's novel 'Family Life', cultural studies illuminate the complexities of Ajay's character as he navigates the intersection of Indian and American cultures. Ajay embodies the archetype of the scapegoat hero, a figure burdened with guilt and responsibility for the sake of the family or community. His narrative unfolds against the backdrop of immigrant experiences, exploring themes of displacement, assimilation, and identity formation.

Cultural studies highlight the broader societal expectations that shape Ajay's experiences. His father's relentless pursuit of academic success as a form of redemption for Birju's condition reflects cultural pressures within the Indian diaspora community. Ajay reflects on this, noting, "My father expected me to excel in everything, as if my success could somehow make up for Birju's condition" (Sharma 112). This expectation exacerbates Ajay's sense of responsibility and reinforces his role as the scapegoat hero striving to fulfill familial obligations.

Cultural studies offers a poignant exploration of Ajay's resilience and identity quest within the complex framework of immigrant life. His journey mirrors the broader experiences of individuals navigating cultural assimilation and societal pressures, shedding light on the transformative power of cultural identity and the enduring significance of familial bonds.

Ajay's experiences as a scapegoat intersect with themes of cultural identity and assimilation, highlighting the challenges faced by immigrants in navigating the tensions between tradition and modernity, loyalty to family and individual autonomy. As an Indian-American immigrant, Ajay straddles multiple worlds, grappling with questions of belonging, heritage, and cultural assimilation. His status as the scapegoat within the family dynamic further complicates his sense of identity, as he struggles to reconcile his Indian heritage with his American upbringing.

In another scene, Ajay reflects on his sense of cultural displacement, stating, "I felt like I didn't belong anywhere. Not in India, not in America." This excerpt underscores Ajay's struggle to reconcile the conflicting expectations and stereotypes imposed upon him by society. Despite his efforts to assimilate and adapt to his new environment, Ajay remains acutely aware of his otherness

and alienation, highlighting the profound impact of his scapegoat status on his sense of cultural identity.

Moreover, Ajay's experiences as a scapegoat have far-reaching consequences for his relationships and sense of belonging within the wider community. He is often subjected to ridicule, bullying, and isolation by his peers, who perceive him as different or inferior due to his family's circumstances. Ajay's status as the scapegoat further exacerbates his feelings of alienation and estrangement from both his Indian heritage and American identity.

The protagonist's scapegoat status is deeply influenced by cultural and societal norms that dictate familial roles and responsibilities within the Indian-American community. From the outset, Ajay finds himself burdened by the weight of familial expectations and obligations, as he grapples with the aftermath of his brother Birju's tragic accident. The cultural expectation of filial piety and duty compels Ajay to prioritize his brother's care and well-being above his own needs and desires, exacerbating his sense of guilt and self-blame. Moreover, societal attitudes towards disability and difference further compound Ajay's scapegoat status, as he navigates the stigma and prejudice surrounding his brother's condition within both Indian and American contexts.

Ajay's immigrant experiences and cultural expectations significantly contribute to his role as the scapegoat within the family dynamic. As an Indian-American immigrant, Ajay grapples with the challenge of reconciling his Indian heritage with his American identity, navigating the complexities of cultural assimilation and societal pressures. The tension between cultural expectations and individual autonomy is palpable throughout the novel, as Ajay struggles to assert his own agency and identity within the confines of familial and cultural norms. His scapegoat status becomes a poignant reflection of the immigrant experience, highlighting the complexities of identity, belonging, and cultural adaptation in a foreign land.

The protagonist's scapegoat identity intersects with broader cultural themes in "Family Life," shedding light on the complexities of immigrant life and familial dynamics within the Indian-American diaspora. Ajay's negotiation of multiple identities—Indian, American, immigrant, scapegoat—underscores the fluidity of identity within diverse cultural contexts, challenging stereotypes and misconceptions through his lived experiences and personal journey of self-discovery. Moreover, his scapegoat status serves as a potent metaphor for the struggles faced by immigrant families and individuals in navigating the complexities of cultural adaptation and assimilation, highlighting the enduring influence of

culture, tradition, and societal attitudes on individual identity and belonging.

By examining the cultural and societal factors shaping the protagonist's scapegoat status a deeper understanding of the complexities of immigrant life and familial dynamics within "Family Life" by Akhil Sharma has been understood. Ajay's journey serves as a powerful exploration of identity, belonging, and acceptance within the Indian-American diaspora, offering insights into the challenges and triumphs of immigrant families and individuals in contemporary society.

III. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Akhil Sharma's novel "Family Life" offers a compelling exploration of Ajay Mishra as a scapegoat hero within the Indian-American diaspora, addressing key objectives of this study. Through detailed analysis, we have examined how Ajay embodies the scapegoat archetype, navigating complex familial obligations and cultural assimilation.

The convergence of cultural, psychological, and narrative factors in Ajay's journey underscores his quest for identity and belonging amidst the immigrant experience. His experiences of guilt, redemption, and cultural displacement are intricately woven into the narrative, revealing profound insights into the challenges faced by immigrant families in reconciling tradition with modernity.

The portrayal of Ajay Mishra as a modern scapegoat hero in "Family Life" not only resonates with traditional heroic narratives of adversity and redemption but also enriches contemporary literature by exploring the enduring themes of sacrifice, guilt, and cultural identity amidst the complexities of immigrant life in the Indian-American diaspora.

Drawing parallels between Ajay's journey and traditional literary figures highlights the universal themes of adversity and transformation. By contextualizing "Family Life" within broader cultural frameworks, this study enriches our understanding of the scapegoat hero archetype in contemporary literature.

Moving forward, comparative analyses with other immigrant narratives, exploration of reader responses, and investigation into Sharma's motivations promise further insights into the novel's thematic depth. These avenues will continue to illuminate how literature reflects and shapes our understanding of identity, resilience, and the human condition in diverse cultural contexts.

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