

THE PORTRAYAL OF SOCIO- CULTURAL ISSUES IN AKHIL SHARMA'S *AN OBEDIENT FATHER*

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Abstract

Purpose of the Study: The aim of this paper is to explore the portrayal of socio-cultural issues in Akhil Sharma's novel, *An Obedient Father* and the issues of cultural identity tormenting situations and incidents in a family and in their relationship with one another.

Methodology: The research paper proposes to make use of the writings of Akhil Sharma's novel, *An Obedient Father* through ground study with references drawn from a cultural perspective. The secondary data included related articles and web sources related to diaspora and cultural studies. The secondary data obtained help the researcher arrive at important inference and conclusion. The present paper analyses the cultural issues and problems faced by the characters and concentrates on the specific techniques and styles used by the novelist.

Main Findings: The finding of the study is that Sharma integrates conventional Indian ideologies born out of a colonial past with an unknown future, depicting the cultural trauma and the problems of survival. It also brings out socio-cultural issues through the major characters particularly the protagonist Ram Karan reflects the contemporary modern man's corrupted personality. It also focuses on how the modern man breaks away from the age-old Indian tradition and culture and how Indian politics failed to maintain the traditional socio-cultural values.

Applications of the Study: When analyzing the cultural issues in *An Obedient Father*, the readers can understand that Sharma is a diaspora novelist and his characters face the problems of expatriation, immigration, dislocation, disorientation, and displacement. This study is very useful to the researchers in the field of Indian Literature, Diaspora Literature, and Cultural studies.

Novelty/Originality of this study: This paper highlights a realistic picture of contemporary India is portrayed by recording the changing Indian social and political scene with carefully creating the fictional characters for creative purposes. Sharma draws an acid-etched picture of modern Indian society, in which the corrupt political system victimizes all citizens.

Keywords: *Diaspora, Immigrant, Culture, Scattered, Democracy, Tradition.*

INTRODUCTION

Akhil Sharma is an Indian Diaspora novelist, essayist, short story writer, and Professor of Creative Writings. His writings are evidence of his greater sensitiveness to immigrant's cultural [identity](#) issues. Indian Literature in English is a historically verifiable phenomenon. It is the result of the commercial, cultural, and literary encounter between India and Britain. The wealth of Indian literature reveals the fact that the creativity and the experience of the writers have made a lasting impression. The roots of Indian Literature in English could legally be traced in what has been said in the British and European attempts to understand and interpret India. The Indians had traveled so far in search of better opportunities. Many of them belonged to small peasant families; they had mortgaged lands and for that, they have to pay land revenue. The land was mortgaged or sold to finance the journey on the expectation that money would improve the financial condition of the family. Indians who migrated later did so for better education and professional opportunities. Most of them planned to return after gaining a few years of experience or a master's degree or after making piles of money. But in many cases, their return to their native country did not get materialized for various reasons such as adaptation to a better lifestyle, greater opportunities for advancement and professional satisfaction.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objective of this study is to trace the Cultural issues presented in Akhil Sharma's novel, *An Obedient Father* focusing on his themes and techniques. This research paper aims to bring the following objectives:

1. To study how Cultural issues are articulated in the selected novel and how to overcome this kind of problem of alienation, dislocation, and identity crisis.
2. To bring into focus varied aspects of the novelist experience, vision, and language from a different angle.
3. To find a realistic picture of Sharma's characters portrayed by recording the changing Indian social and political issues.
4. To study the difference between the Indian and American culture and how the major characters are alienated from their host culture.

5. To understand the real nature and character of the contemporary man and how he becomes corrupt, selfish, and lustful against their own traditional culture.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The scope of the study is varied. Diaspora literature reveals the life and experiences of immigrants, and focuses mainly on the themes like discrimination, cultural shock and reverses cultural shock, problems in adjustment, assimilation, orientation, identity crisis, alienation, displacement, dilemma, depression, hybridity, and generational gap. The British colonization of India and America paved the way for the [Indian diaspora](#) to a great extent. Along with immigration cultural, national, personal, and ideological conflicts started. Akhil Sharma has captured the problems faced by all those who left their homeland in search of green pastures. [Akhil Sharma](#) is considered as an Indian American diaspora writer and his writings deal with Indian cultural issues. Indian culture epitomizes itself as a collective representation of thousands of distinct and unique cultures of all the religions and communities that span the length and breadth of India. It springs out of the infinite varieties of religion, music, dance, art, architecture, custom, tradition, and cuisine that are found scattered among the various states of the nation. It stands deep-rooted since times immemorial, nourishing the lives of its citizens, and binding them together in a familial and societal relationship of a unique kind, fostering the spirit of patience, tolerance, suffering, and sharing among its citizens. Thus, it is also yoking together firmly the rich diversity of the nation under the single harness of democracy.

EXPECTED ADVANTAGES

This paper will help the readers to understand the various factors involved in cross-cultural encounters, the resultant problems, and possible solutions. It also sensitizes the immigrant community on the pros and cons of dislocation and relocation and the need for re-orientation toward Indian culture and tradition to avoid post-modern feelings of exile. It will highlight the value of Indian culture and tradition as unique and a powerful tool of bondage and togetherness. It will provide awareness among young researchers and students planning for their future life.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The contribution of Akhil Sharma to the contemporary Indian Diaspora literature and socio-cultural problems has been immense and critics and reviewers have expressed critical opinions on them. Their critical essays give insight into the depth of Sharma's purpose and reason for portraying each character. There are few book-length studies available on these novelists and also numerous essays published in journals and magazines. Most of the critics and reviewers eulogize of Sharma handling of the subject matter with a serious concern especially his treatment of diaspora, culture, immigrant, isolated, politics, family, and government rule.

Amitav Ghosh (1989), in his article "[The Diaspora in Indian Culture](#)," points out that Diaspora is increasingly a part within the culture of the Indian subcontinent, it complicated that one of the "interesting features of the cultural representations of space in India is that India has always been constituted as much by the concept of the periphery as it has by the notion of the center." He finds that this notion of the margin has now expanded to include the diaspora which he portrays as that element of itself which is both hostage and representative in the world outside; it is the mirror in which modern India seeks to know itself.

[Kavita Sharma \(1995\), in her review of Ginu](#) Ginu Kamani's *Jungle Girl* *Jungle Girl*, highlights that the Diasporic experience of Indians, Caribbeans, Africans, and other citizens of the world is a recurrent theme in Diasporic literature. For example, Ginu Kamani's *Jungle Girl* deals with the difficulties that women face in a foreign land to the extent of arriving at the conclusion that diasporic experiences differ based on gender. In other words, women find it difficult to adapt and adjust with the new surroundings governed by an alien culture whereas, men adjust easily. Indian women become economically independent as they seek employment in foreign land. This indirectly promotes a rift between a patriarchal Indian society and the independent social structure of the host country. Ginu Kamani's novel *Jungle Girl* also deals with the insecurities of immigrants and the difficulties they face while trying to uphold their own culture in a new country. So, the characters feel that their life and their homeland is better than a life which they have at present in a different country. So, they are caught between as Mathew Arnold says, "Two worlds, one indeed and other is powerless to be born."

[Amy Ryce. \(2000\), in his review on "Akhil Sharma's An Obedient Father](#), " highlights that *An Obedient Father* is not for the faint of heart. He has painstakingly written an absorbing first novel and it recalls the character and conflict of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Sharma's *An Obedient Father*'s story takes place in New Delhi and it revolves the experience and crime of a school inspector Ram Karan. His boring job and lackluster personality enhance rather than dilute, the richness of the story. The Crime of Ram Karan ranges from incest and assassination to a shocking level of Indian government corruption. Through the story, we understand that one who is planning a crime, it is worse than knowing accident. The powerlessness can be crimes as a serious murder, depending on a circumstance. This novel makes an interesting and exotic world and giving life to a realistic character of ambiguous morality.

Joshua [Kuritzky. \(2000\), in his review on "An Obedient Father with skeletons in his closet](#)," describes that Akhil Sharma's *An Obedient Father* deals that the protagonist Ram Karan has molested and raped 12 years old his own daughter Anita. He also prefers that his Skelton interesting stay in the closet, but unexpectedly his daughter's husband died and she compels to stay with him along with her 8 years old daughter Asha. Ram uses this opportunity and he assaults not only his daughter

and also his granddaughter with a drunken mood. Finally, Anita came to understand this incident and she wants to save her daughter and revealed the truth with relatives. They advised her to leave her father for safety, but her circumstance is unable to practice it. Here, the novelist Sharma is skillful portraits the condition of India after independence and even a daughter doesn't have safety in her own house because of her father's crime and his adaptation of new culture. Through Ram's character we understand, a crime of this severity and a Skelton of size, we regret the victim and hate the victimizer.

[Diane Mahta. \(2001\), in her review on "Akhil Sharma's An Obedient Father,"](#) highlights the word "Obedient" hardly describes the character Ram Karan who is considered an antihero of the novel. He is an incompetent school inspector who collects bribes from schools for the ruling political party congress. He is living with his widow daughter, Anita. The novelist presents how corruption is a metaphor for India's loss of innocence of the massacres after independence. It is also explored that the image of violence that pepper the novel, is forced a parade of a naked Muslim girl and trainload of dead Hindus and Muslims. This kind of trauma becomes clear that it can make normal people of insensible acts. At the end of the novel, the protagonist is not happy and he suffered a heart problem, it reflects that the Indian's mood and the people want to go a lucky place.

[Mohammad Ejaz Alam. \(2013\), in his article, "Indian Diaspora and Writers from Country in Conflict,"](#) it reveals the Indian diaspora. The diaspora is the case of forced alienation to a distant Diasporic settlement. The homeland becomes the ideal subject of Diasporic writers. So, it can be the first diaspora and the second diaspora was towards the material, professional and business interests, etc. It is presenting the realities of privilege and advanced technology. Diasporic writing stresses the feeling of alienation and the affection of their native place. It's dispersed a double identification with the original homeland. It also exists towards an identity crisis, nostalgia, and the displacement in the adopted country. Diasporic writings also are the same extent. It is toward the business of founding new angels to enter reality. The realities of such a crisis are enabling new structures of feeling. It is also restricted in the form of culture and official truths. So, the Diasporic writers are the global paradigm shift. They are challenges of postmodernism to overarching narratives of power. So, power has gained ascendance. It found a current status of privilege.

[Mohanalakshmi Rajkumar \(2013\) in her article "The Taboo in Indian Literature in English: Expanded Ways of Writings and Reading Indianness"](#) reveals that Indian literature in English new tackles some of the hardest questions in modern society; incest, rape, and pornography are issues being explored by the reader. In the place of rigid morality and a sweeping sense of the colonial influence, Akhil Sharma has texts pushing against the forbidden in sub-continental values. Sharma's *An Obedient Father* deals with the story of a corrupt government official who repeatedly molests his own daughter. The frank and honest way in which the novelist deal with the seams of life in the households announces a commitment to art through mimicking the underbelly of life. Sharma's narrative unfolds with the malignant specter the story of a father living in an apartment with the widowed daughter he has victimized.

[Nicholas Lezard. \(2015\), in his review on "An Obedient Father-moral corruption in New Delhi,"](#) explores that the novelist Sharma depicts a country that could have a sprung from a mind poised somewhere between Dostoevsky's and Gogol's. The novel begins that the protagonist, Ram Karan acknowledged his corruption and weakness through his conversation over the phone with his friend. This kind of mistake commits not only Ram Karan but also his boss Mr. Gupta and also the ruling Politicians .ram's all the crimes inspiring from his boss Mr. Gupta. Ram makes crimes but always Ram lies over his responsibility .we understand that Ram manages to extort money. The fact that corruption is an uncomfortable process, no more preventable weather. The readers can understand that what is rotten in the state, is also rotten in the heart. We learn through the character Ram Kuran who raped his own 12 years old daughter stopped when his wife discovered.

[Caitlin Love. \(2016\), in the review on "Akhil Sharma's An Obedient Father,"](#) portrays on the [novelist Akhil Sharma's Interview](#) "My First Time" is a series of short videos about how he begins his first novel *An Obedient Father*. These videos are created by the filmmakers Tom Bean, Casey Brooks, and Luke Poling and the essence of these videos is each writer as a beginner and their creations have joy, delusion, abjection, and euphoria. For example, Akhil Sharma's first novel, *An Obedient Father* which he started when he was a student at Stanford. He expresses his experience and idea of his writings. He says, he writes five pages every day and he has completed it within two months without having any idea and ambition.

[Sharma in his Interview with Dylan Foley \(2017\)](#) explains that his novel *An Obedient Father* is written based on a real story. A gym teacher in his forties attends as a wedding party of his senior with his son. Both the teachers are corrupt as they steal money from government schools and take bribe from the public in order to please their political bosses of both congress and BJP parties. The junior goes to an extent to disgrace himself by getting inebriated to please the higher authorities. The protagonist in *An Obedient Father* is not only guilty of corruption but also of incest. Sharma's critics and reviewers argue that his novel *An Obedient Father* reveals the cultural concerns such as changing the trend in education, culture, human disaster, religious disparities, depressed state of intelligence and corruption tries which are prevailing in the society. Sharma's novel reveals the attitudes of different characters in the social-cultural circumstance of the narratives in the early twenty-first century. They are using simple language, contract with the lives, incidents, and minds of the new generation. The writer belongs to middle class and writes about the same which creates them popular among the mass readers.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

The study helps to find out corruptive practices of collecting money to bribe the electorates during the election of 1990's.

Mr. Gupta is a congressman who is assigned the job of collecting money from the public for election expenditures. Ram Karen is also guilty of the offense of collecting money from schools as part of his contribution. The main themes of the novel are the problematic, tempestuous, and incestuous family history of Ram Karan and corruptive practices Mr. Gupta's tryst with politics. The protagonist, the boss of a junior gym teacher and few politicians has worked against the very cultural framework and values of India. The techniques adopted are from the consciousness of Ram Karan and it is narrated using flashback techniques also. Therefore, the storyline moves between the past and the present. Ram Karan's criminal mind and obsession with sex especially with his daughter present shock and disbelief. But, he was caught red-handed by his wife Radha and she beats him though she could not expose his mistakes due to social stigma.

As a result of the discovery of his guilt, RamKaren suffered lot mentally and he tried to whom she wanted to see dead. So, she maintains silence which helps Ram Karan in contrition. One night Ram Karan in a drunken mood tries to expose his incestuous feeling with his grand-daughter Asha. On seeing this incident, Anita became fierce and started blaming him aloud for the sins he committed in his life. She begs him to rectify his sins. Every though Karan tries to rectify his sins, the intensity of his sins looks beyond the mercy. As a father, who has to be a role model of the family commits a crime and the whole family becomes Aeschylean.

Anita's horrible experience over her own father's sexual assault for the past twenty years is still continuing in the experience of herself and her daughter Asha. This incident is against the Indian cultural values and Ram Karan is a crucial person to damage the age-old Indian heritage. In this context, Anita comments, "Here you raped your daughter till she bled. And then here you are with your granddaughter, rubbing yourself against her like she's a pillow. You wait twenty years between the two as if nothing has happened" ([An Obedient Father, p. 240](#)). Anita connects her sexual exploitation of her childhood to the sexual exploitation of her daughter's and thereby reads Ram's potential to be a repeated Pedophilia. As an adult widowed woman, Anita no longer has any family privilege to protect by her silence and can speak against her father. She confronts her father in a night-time conversation similar to the one year before with her mother. Her words are direct and probe how much she knew about his abuse of her. Anita explains that "I always knew," she began calmly . . . "I did not know you were cruel, you were merciless. Every time you touched me. Every time you made me touch you, I Knew" ([An Obedient Father p. 129](#)). This reversal of power in this scene arises from Anita's capacity to explain and confront the past while her father remains silent, unable to acknowledge his role as the criminal of the abuse. The years of repressed silence burst out of Anita as an adult woman, angry at decisions made by her parents who were not in her best interests, as she shouts in the midst of gasps, "I look at twelve-year-olds and think, I was like that. Who could do that to a twelve-year-old? You and Ma! What kind of a mother was she?" ([An Obedient Father, p 130](#)). Anita questions the advice of her mother the night her father rapes is discovered and also the ensuing silence of the rest of her life. It is on the evening of the one year anniversary of her mother's death that Anita confronts her feelings towards her parents; an occasion normally self-restrained to honor the dead, Anita uses to worry her feelings at frightening for familial stability. Anita is not merely satisfied with discharging her feelings and is resolved to withdraw a confession from her father. This kind of incident is considered as the most powerful moment in the novel and Anita confronts her abuser and demands his confession: Say, 'I'm a dog.' Say, 'Forgive me. I am an animal and I will forgive you. Say, 'I' am a rabid dog that should be beaten to death with bricks.' Admit it and we can go on. Admit it!. Say, 'I' am a stinking shit.' I know what I did and I should die" ([An Obedient Father, p. 131](#)).

The assassination of the then Prime minister, Mr. Rajiv Gandhi in Sriperumbudur, Tamil Nadu, India by a bomb blast suddenly changed the political arena as there was no proper leader to guide the Congress party. The turmoil, confusion, shock, and distress in the Congress party indirectly acted as 'a blessing in disguise' for the new upcoming political party, the BJP. Ram Karan was confused as well as he did not know how to save himself from the wrath of the major parties like Congress and BJP. So, he sought to safeguard through his daughter and grand-daughter due to the compensation of the contrive mind.

The novel *An Obedient Father* is swayed by two equally powerful themes betrayal and retrieval. The betrayal committed by Ram Karan is like blood against blood and blood against water that is father against children and man against his own culture and society. The Protagonist betrays his own family and undergoes humiliation and compunctions of conscience thrust on him by his own daughter. Since he betrayed the trust and faith she had bestowed on him. Ram Karan wants to turn a new leaf but he cannot stand on the pedestal of culture and humanity. Though his desire to satisfy his erotic feelings dominates now and then. When Anita saw her father in compromising postures with her daughter, her hope in humanity and family morality took a reverse turn and falls into the lowest depth of depravity. 'Bribe taking' was once an affront on man's morality and culture. But in the present century of moral degradation gratifying 'and itching palm' for easy money has become the order of the day. Ram Karan is not an exception. The psychological drama resulted from the cancerous cell of incestuous desire has destroyed the familial tranquillity of an otherwise settled family. Though Ram Karan disowns his own guilt all damage is done and Anita and Asha cannot escape from enervating influences of the domestic tragedy.

As for our Indian traditional culture, the children are afraid of their parents especially the father. They think of him as their role model, but here in the novel, it is entirely different. The protagonist's daughter Anita wants her father should die or disappear from the earth. He does not act as a father and he becomes a lecherous and corrupted man. His behavior forced his children to form a negative attitude towards father in general. The character of Ram Karan portrayed by the novelist is none but a cultural killer. He is overfed and underworked as an Inspector of Physical Education in Delhi's corrupt school

system. Anita, his daughter Asha, lives with him after the death of her husband, a bank official. Kusum, Anita's sister, who was brought up by an uncle, is now married to an American. Mrs. Cahudhury, Ram Karan's superior at work, has lost both her breasts due to cancer and was nearly caught selling ten thousand rupees worth of government mercury when she was principal of a school. Mr. Bajwa, a former colleague of Ram Karan who has been sacked for corruption, drifts weirdly throughout the novel.

Ram Karan forced himself on Anita when she was a little older than Asha is now. He kept on doing it until he was caught in the act one night by Radha, his now-dead wife, who sent their second daughter Kusum off to live with relatives to ensure her safety. From then onwards, under Radha's unforgiving eye, and even after her death, Ram Karan behaved himself until this incident with his granddaughter Asha. After this incident, he becomes the obedient father. There is no question of Anita and her daughter living separately; they cannot afford it. So, for Asha's sake, Anita lays down the law: Ram Karan's contact with her is limited. He does not get to spend time with his granddaughter unsupervised. He obeys for a while. Then, he starts meeting his granddaughter at her school, surreptitiously. He meets her in public and takes her out for small treats: innocuous stuff, but all the same a transgression of the rules Anita has laid down. One day Anita finds out that Ram Karan is with her daughter Asha. She takes it upon herself more than to tell every one of her relatives about Ram Karan's misdeed with her. From then on her father's movements are restricted. His universe dwindles to his work and the room at home. He lives in fear of his daughter until one day he dies of a heart attack. Later, when Asha reaches puberty, she becomes a target for all the men in the Mohalla, who are aware of the dead Ram Karan's crimes. Finally, Asha is sent to America to her Aunt, Kusum's house for safety, although unwillingly. Her aunt is a successful career woman in America.

The child, Asha, is credible as well. She is innocent, unable to see her grandfather and her mother fighting over her. But in the end, it is through her character that the weakness of the story emerges for there are several unanswered questions. Asha, for all she has suffered in Delhi, has reservations about leaving her mother and her home to go and live with her aunt Kusum. After that Anita is alone in Delhi, disputing her meager inheritance with her brother. At the end of the novel, the reader can understand that this story is not for the American reader, it is fully Indian sensibility because the portrayal of Ram Karan's character is in the context of Indian present socio-cultural situation.

CONCLUSION

Indian culture is mutually inclusive of the complex amalgamation of several cultures of the Indian sub-continent on the one hand, and the varying textures that its colonizers added to it as indelible marks of history on the other hand. It gets fully mirrored in one's own community, religion, the process of consuming food, behavior towards other members in the community, educational style, career one chooses to pursue, or the friends and family one likes to maintain, or just stray instances of communal disharmony in the area. Akhil Sharma's *An Obedient Father* has discussed the setting of India, and America in the new millennium, marked by incredible progress, appalling poverty, corruption, family sentiments, immigrant life, cultural alienation, and a decadent polity. It is also highlighted how the Socio-cultural issues reflect an individual life (like Ram Karan) and how Sharma significantly traces how culture and tradition provide the Indians with a distinct identity and how the culture of India enables them to affirm, reaffirm, embrace, and celebrate life in totality. The novel analyses the dilemma of the Indian in a society with different social and cultural values, as such it will be relevant to treat Sharma novel with the formulations, concepts, and constructs of the socio-cultural approach to interpreting it and the behavioural patterns, world view and responses of his major characters Ram Karan, Anita and Asha. These characters are live against their socio-cultural norms and their sexual practice is against the entire range of society's beliefs, institutions, and communicative practices, including the family bondage. The protagonist Ram Karan's character is portrayed in such a way that he is against Indian socio-cultural ethics and he spoils the age-old Indian traditions, customs, behaviors, and values.

FINDING AND SUGGESTIONS

Sharma's novel gives a crisp impact of immigration on familial affinity. [Sharma's novel *An Obedient Father*](#) is dedicated to the struggle for the revival of diaspora culture, displacement, alienation, sexuality, familial affinity, and socio-culture identity in the twenty-first century. This novel gives the greater sensitiveness to maintain cultural identity issues. He depicts through the novel that the sins in the society have made troubles and pains in the protagonist's life which led to socio-cultural issues. India has experienced a drastic change in all spheres of socio-cultural life amid the communal riots, political exploitations, bribery, and corruption on the one hand and rapid economic progress, new technological inventions on the other. Sharma concludes that poverty, superstition, racial conflicts, loss of hope, and dejection over the send of ethical values and judicial morality have the potentiality to create a society a riddle with graft, religious intolerance and ultimately the power to destroy individuals independent spirit.

SCOPE OF FURTHER RESEARCHERS

The scope of further research is: 1. Diaspora Identity in Akhil Sharma's *An Obedient Father*. 2. Cultural confrontation in Akhil Sharma novel, *An Obedient Father*. 3. Sexual Exploitation in Akhil Shama's *An Obedient Father*.

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