

A PSYCHOANALYTIC EXAMINATION OF IDENTITY AND DISILLUSIONMENT IN SINDYA BHANOO'S *A LIFE OF AMERICA*

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a psychoanalytic look at Sindya Bhanoo's short story A Life of America highlighting themes of identity, displacement, and emotional suppression. The story follows Chandrasekharan (Chand), an older Indian professor living in America, whose longtime support for Indian graduate students comes under scrutiny, resulting in accusations of exploitation. By closely examining the text, the paper reveals that Chand's kindness—such as providing housing, emotional help, and cultural connection—might be driven not just by a desire to help others but also by his own unresolved trauma and feelings of loneliness. His complicated relationship with his wife, Raji, adds more layers to the narrative, showing their different views on cultural responsibilities and personal boundaries. The analysis also looks at the wider immigrant experience, gaps between generations, and the emotional toll of unrecognized desires and identity struggles faced by those living in diaspora.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, Identity crisis, Cultural exploitation, Immigrant experience, Shame and guilt.

INTRODUCTION

Sindya Bhanoo's short story, *A Life of America* reveals the complex emotional world of Chandrasekharan, an Indian professor living in America. He has spent years helping his Indian graduate students, but this kindness unexpectedly leads to accusations of exploitation. At first, Chand's generosity seems genuine; he opens his home as a safe haven for rest and study and even helps with free long-distance calls. His actions stem from his own past experiences as a lonely graduate student in Montana, where he craved connection and support. The comfort he received from another Indian professor, Dr. Gupta, influences how he treats his students today. This story encourages readers to think about whether Chand's kindness is purely selfless or if it also hides deeper motivations related to his unresolved feelings from the past. Does he help his students because he wants to care for them, or is it a way to heal his own loneliness by giving what he once needed?

The story also highlights the complicated relationship between Chand and his wife, Raji. Her subtle comments, like saying Arun's frequent help with yard work is "too much," suggest she has a more realistic view of their situation. While Chand may be too caught up in his needs and cultural background to notice boundaries, Raji seems aware of them. Her "unreadable" eyes during Chand's retelling of the reporter's call indicate she is processing something important—something that contrasts with Chand's initial shock and disbelief. This dynamic raises questions about how aware they both are of their changing roles and the power struggles with their students.

When the reporter arrives and makes accusations, Chand's mind reacts in several ways to protect itself. His first response is denial—saying, "You must have the wrong number"—which acts as a quick defense against a truth that threatens how he sees himself as a kind and generous mentor. As the accusations get more detailed, he becomes convinced that Banerjee, a colleague he dislikes, is behind the attacks. This shows projection; he shifts his own negative feelings or actions onto someone else. He tries to justify the help he gives students by saying it's like family support within

their culture, which highlights his effort to keep his self-image intact despite outside challenges. The return of an incident from two years ago, something Chand had seemingly pushed aside, emphasizes how people often hide uncomfortable truths that clash with how they see themselves.

The story reaches a peak during Chand's heartfelt conversation with Arun, a former student from his hometown. This moment is crucial for understanding his psychology. When Chand directly asks about forced labor and claims, "*I treated you the way I treat my own kids,*" it shows his deep-rooted yet possibly flawed view of mentoring. Arun's eventual confession that he left "because of you" breaks down Chand's carefully built illusion, forcing him to face the fact that at least one student he respected saw his good intentions in a different light. This eye-opening moment, observed by Raji, creates a significant crack in Chand's defenses and opens up a space for him to deal with the painful but necessary realization of how his actions might have unintended effects and the challenges of cultural differences. The narrative thus sets the stage for an exploration of identity, the subjective nature of perception, and the psychological fallout when one's deeply cherished self-image is challenged by external accusations and the internal echoes of past experiences.

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

This study is important for a number of reasons. First, it helps us understand the psychological aspects of cultural exchange and what immigrants go through, especially the difficulties they face in keeping their cultural identity while fitting into a new society. Second, by using psychoanalytical theory, it reveals the hidden reasons and unconscious biases that influence how people interact, especially in mentor-mentee relationships. The story shows Chand's fall from grace due to accusations of exploitation, highlighting the need to understand power dynamics and how easily things can be misunderstood in cross-cultural situations. This analysis also points out how truth and memory can be subjective, as Chand's memories of events are very different from the students' views. Additionally, the study enriches literary criticism by providing a detailed interpretation of Bhanoo's "*A Life of America*," emphasizing the psychological layers found in its story.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To examine how Chand's past as a graduate student in America affects his current behavior and relationships with his Indian students.
- To look into the idea of "cultural exploitation" found in the story, using a psychological perspective.
- To evaluate how individual and group unconscious thoughts influence the views and claims made by the students against Chand.
- To explore the psychological effects of Chand's loneliness and his efforts to align his self-image with reality.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) How did Chand's experiences as an immigrant student in America create an unconscious wish to "rescue" or "parent" his Indian graduate students, which might have led to crossing boundaries?
- 2) What part did the shared feelings of the immigrant community play in encouraging Chand's helpful actions and later contributing to the complaints against him?
- 3) How did being publicly shamed and losing his professional identity affect Chand's ego and self-esteem, eventually leading him to resign?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Psychoanalytic theory, developed by Sigmund Freud, provides a strong way to understand the complicated nature of the human mind, especially how unconscious desires, conflicts, and defense mechanisms affect behavior. Freud introduced a model of the psyche that includes three parts: the id, ego, and superego. Each part plays an important role in forming a person's personality and how they interact with others. The id seeks immediate pleasure by fulfilling basic urges. The superego represents learned societal rules and morals, acting like a conscience. The ego works on what is realistic, balancing the desires of the id, the restrictions of the superego, and real-world limits (Freud, 1923).

Later psychoanalytic thinkers like Jacques Lacan built on Freud's ideas by adding concepts such as the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real orders to explain how identity and desire develop. Lacanian psychoanalysis particularly highlights how language and unconscious thoughts shape our identities and relationships with others (Lacan, 1977).

When it comes to analyzing literature, psychoanalytic theory helps us look at why characters act as they do, what symbols mean, and the deeper psychological struggles within stories (Hossain, 2017). Researchers have used psychoanalytic methods to study character growth, trauma, and memory in books. For example, the idea of trauma in psychoanalysis shows how intense experiences can be pushed down but may later show up in various ways that affect current behavior and views (Freud, 1920). In "The Professor's House," Chand's feelings of loneliness from his past and his wish for connection—rooted in his immigrant background—unconsciously influence how he interacts with his students.

The way power and control work, often based on hidden motivations, has been looked at through the lens of psychoanalysis. Ideas like the master-slave dialectic, which started with Hegel, can be understood through this perspective to see how dominance and submission in relationships develop. In this view, the "slave" may gain recognition and self-awareness through their hard work and suffering (Hegel, 1807). This kind of relationship can also happen between students and teachers, where kindness from a teacher might unintentionally create an imbalance of power.

Psychoanalysis often talks about defense mechanisms, which are unconscious methods the mind uses to shield itself from anxiety caused by unacceptable thoughts or feelings. Some common defense mechanisms are denial, repression, projection, rationalization, and displacement (Freud, 1936). Chand's first response to a reporter's call—denying everything and trying to brush off the accusations—illustrates these mechanisms.

Transference and countertransference are also important in understanding mentor-mentee relationships. Transference is when someone unconsciously redirects their feelings for a significant person from their past onto someone in their present life. Countertransference refers to how a mentor or therapist reacts unconsciously to what the mentee or client feels (Freud, 1912). Chand's behavior might reflect his own past loneliness and his wish to create a "family" atmosphere for his students; this could be seen as countertransference because he projects his unmet needs onto them. Likewise, if students feel obligated or resentful towards Chand, this could be viewed as transference since they may be projecting past experiences or societal pressures onto him. Lastly, studying shame and guilt within psychoanalysis helps explain how people deal with feelings of having done something wrong. Guilt usually comes from actions taken, while shame arises from feeling inadequate or failing to meet personal standards (Lewis, 1971). Chand's reactions to the article suggest a profound sense of shame, not just guilt for specific actions, as his entire self-perception as a benevolent figure was shattered.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative research method, specifically focusing on psychoanalytic literary criticism. The main data came from Sindya Bhanoo's short story, "Different." The analysis involved closely reading the text and examining character dialogues, internal thoughts, actions, and symbols in the story. The story was read several times to understand its overall plot, character development, and themes related to immigration, cultural differences, power dynamics, and self-image. Each key character—Chand, Raji, John, and Arun—was analyzed separately to uncover their conscious and unconscious motivations, fears, and defense mechanisms shown in their words and actions. Special attention was given to Chand's inner conflicts and his past experiences. Freudian ideas like the id, ego, superego, repression, denial, projection, and transference were used to interpret the characters' behaviors and how the story unfolds. Relevant Lacanian concepts of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real were also considered to explore how identity is formed or lost.

The study looked at the power dynamics in Chand's relationships with his students, especially how they shifted from seeming kindness to accusations of exploitation. It examined the implied "master- slave" relationship and its cultural meanings. Additionally, symbolic elements like the house, hot tub, grill, and newspaper were explored for their deeper psychological significance. The insights gained from analyzing individual characters and their relationships were combined to create a thorough psychoanalytic understanding of the story's main conflicts and Chand's final psychological state. This qualitative method enables a deep exploration of the text that went beyond just summarizing events to reveal the complex psychological influences within the narrative.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was based on Freudian psychoanalytic theory, focusing especially on the ideas of the id, ego, and superego, defense mechanisms, and how past experiences shape current behavior. It also used the concepts of transference and countertransference to explore the complicated dynamics in mentor-mentee relationships.

The id represented Chand's basic desires, such as his unconscious need for connection, his wish to recreate the warmth he felt with Dr. Gupta, and possibly a desire for control and validation through his generosity. The ego acted as a mediator for Chand, trying to balance these desires with the reality of his professional and social life. His conscious kindness and pride in helping students came from this ego function, which justified his actions as purely selfless. However, the story showed that the ego could be fragile when faced with outside criticism. The superego reflected internalized societal and cultural standards that guided Chand's sense of duty and proper behavior. His commitment to traditional Indian values of hospitality and mentorship included informal help, which was a big part of his superego. A conflict arose when these internalized values clashed with American professional expectations and changing views from his students.

Defense mechanisms were important in how Chand responded to this crisis. His first reaction was denial ("You must have the wrong number"), followed by rationalization ("We are like family"), which helped shield his ego from the painful truth behind the accusations. Later on, his efforts to buy all the newspapers and his thoughts about "integrity" demonstrated a mix of undoing and reaction formation as he tried to dismiss harmful information while maintaining his ideal self-image. Additionally, Chand's inner struggle reflected a type of repression regarding an earlier incident from two years ago that he had "forgotten."

The idea of transference showed up in how the students projected their expectations onto Chand. Some students might have first seen him as a caring father figure (positive transference), while others later felt resentment and a sense of being taken advantage of (negative transference). This

could be linked to larger societal power issues or their past experiences with authority figures. On the other hand, Chand's countertransference appeared in his wish to treat students "like family," which stemmed from an unconscious need to recreate the support he missed as a lonely graduate student. This kind-hearted intention, influenced by his own past feelings of isolation, unintentionally led to some troubling dynamics.

The story also touched on the idea of cultural unconscious, which includes shared beliefs and values within a culture that are often not openly discussed. Chand's behavior was deeply rooted in traditional Indian culture, where it is common for students to show respect towards teachers. A conflict arose when this cultural understanding clashed with the individualistic and rights-focused views that are more common in American society and among younger Indian students. The "cultural exploitation" was thus a clash between different cultural backgrounds, rather than just an issue of deliberate wrongdoing.

Lastly, the narrative examined how shame and guilt affected Chand psychologically. He may have felt guilty about certain actions (like possibly noticing Raji's discomfort with Arun's frequent help), but it seemed that shame was the stronger feeling – the painful sense of being fundamentally flawed and exposed, which shattered his self-image as a "good man." His last moments of reflection, where he questioned "the truth of who he was," highlighted this deep identity crisis.

ANALYSIS

Chandrasekharan, or Chand, appeared as a kind, almost fatherly figure to his Indian graduate students. He showed his care by giving them his house keys, creating a place for them to relax and study, and sharing meals generously. These actions seemed to come from his wish to provide the comforts he missed when he was a graduate student in America. This conscious kindness reflected his ego, which tried to balance how he wanted to see himself (as a caring mentor) with the reality of his students living in "dreary apartments" and feeling lonely.

However, looking deeper into his behavior shows that Chand's generosity also came from strong unconscious reasons linked to his own past. He clearly remembered the loneliness he felt, especially the "great sadness that came from going months without speaking Tamil," along with the comfort he experienced from Dr. Gupta's occasional invitations. These memories pointed to deep feelings of isolation that had troubled him. This background made him unconsciously want to save his students from facing similar struggles. His caring actions were also a way of reacting against feelings of helplessness and longing he had when he was younger. By helping his students, he was also helping the younger version of himself and trying to heal an old wound. This countertransference—his unconscious response to what he thought his students needed based on his unresolved past—greatly influenced how he interacted with them.

Chand's superego was greatly shaped by traditional Indian cultural values, where mentorship involves not just teaching but also caring for someone and providing informal support, much like the "guru-shishya" tradition. This belief made him think that his actions were not just acceptable but praiseworthy. He genuinely "treated them like family," a notion that was deeply rooted in his upbringing. His moral beliefs allowed him to ask for help with tasks like yard work or washing dishes because he viewed these as mutual exchanges within a family bond rather than taking advantage of others. When he said, "We are like family," it wasn't just an excuse; it showed his strong, culturally influenced view of their relationship.

When accusations arose, Chand felt a significant threat to his self-esteem. His first reactions of denial ("You must have the wrong number") and blaming others ("He [Banerjee] framed me!") were typical defense mechanisms used to guard his self-image. He couldn't accept that his kind actions might be seen as exploitative because that clashed with his ideal image of being a good,

selfless mentor. His effort to buy up all the newspapers illustrated magical thinking—a desperate attempt to erase any negative information about him and protect his identity.

Chand's surprise at John's earlier knowledge and John's suggestion for him to resign highlighted how much Chand had pushed away memories of an earlier incident from two years ago. His mind had deliberately set aside this uncomfortable memory as "nothing" in order to keep a consistent and positive story about himself. The return of this repressed memory showed just how fragile his carefully built reality really was.

Raji, while appearing to stay in the background, played an important role as an observer whose unconscious understanding quietly questioned Chand's views. Her *"unreadable"* eyes and her past comment about Arun's yard work —*"Once or twice is okay... This is too much"*—showed that she had a keen sense of reality and was more aware of possible boundary issues than Chand was. She offered a more realistic viewpoint, able to spot potential problems even in acts that seemed kind. Her silence, along with her question *"And then?"* when Chand talked about the reporter's call, was not a sign of disinterest but a way for her to think deeply about what was happening. When she asked directly, *"Do you really think he doesn't know?"* regarding John's involvement, it showed her healthy doubt and a clearer view of human behavior, especially John's selfish nature. This indicates that Raji had a less idealized sense of right and wrong compared to Chand's perspective, which was more influenced by respect for authority figures.

Raji's steady presence and strong support (*"I am here"*) during Chand's tough times acted as a stabilizing force for his crumbling ego. She acknowledged the situation's reality and the need for outside help (like calling the lawyer), helping him find a more effective way to cope. When she eventually cried and firmly stated, *"It's too late to talk about whether I tried to stop you or not,"* it marked a moment of emotional release and clearly expressed her own separate yet connected reality, revealing her hidden frustrations finally coming to light. Although she didn't always speak out loud about it, her awareness acted as an inner guide that Chand might have unconsciously overlooked.

John, the dean and Chand's tennis partner, had a self-preserving ego shaped by practical worries and loyalty to the institution. His friendly behavior was just a social mask that hid his true focus on self-interest and keeping his job safe. When he quickly withdrew support and suggested that Chand *"resign before the hearing,"* it showed that his main loyalty lay with the university's interests and his own position, rather than real friendship.

John tried to explain his late response by saying, *"I'm in Idaho. Bad phone service,"* which was a clear attempt to avoid responsibility and calm Chand's anger. His awareness of the situation since October showed that he deliberately chose to keep his distance, revealing a carefully crafted public image. From a psychoanalytic viewpoint, John's actions were motivated by the need to protect his own innocence and authority within the university system, putting more importance on reputation and rules than on personal loyalty. His comment, *"I'm here for you,"* was just a shallow reassurance meant to ease his own guilt rather than provide real support.

Arun's character showed how complicated transference can be in a mentor-mentee relationship. At first, Arun likely had positive feelings towards Chand, seeing him as a kind figure, maybe even like a father or uncle (*"Chand Uncle"*). His eagerness to help Chand after the flood, even bringing along friends, indicated an early bond between them, likely shaped by cultural expectations of respect. His earlier comment in the article, *"I never felt threatened. I always felt it was voluntary,"* backed up this initial view.

However, when Arun later told Chand, *"And yes, I left because of you,"* it marked a change in his feelings. Over time, what once seemed like kindness may have turned into a sense of duty or an

unspoken weight that led to negative feelings. His wish for independence and finding a *"better fit for his research"* became a way to explain deeper discomfort or pressure from informal demands. This shows a struggle between his learned cultural values (respect) and his personal need for freedom and growth in his career. Arun's final comments were a significant moment where he spoke the truth, forcing Chand to face a reality he had been trying hard to avoid.

The main issue of *"cultural exploitation"* stemmed from a conflict of unseen cultural beliefs. Chand viewed his actions as part of traditional Indian hospitality and mentorship, where serving an elder or guru was normal and seen as a sign of respect and mutual benefit. This belief was strongly supported by his superego, leaving him confused by the accusations against him. The article noted, *"In India, this kind of respectful behavior is common between students and teachers,"* which, although it might be too simple, highlighted this cultural difference.

On the other hand, younger Indian students who were partly or fully influenced by American culture or global norms had a different perspective. Their superego was shaped by Western ideas about individual rights, fair payment for work, and clear professional boundaries. For them, informal requests like "lawn mowing, dishwashing, running errands" crossed the line from cultural generosity to unpaid labor, which they saw as exploitation. The incident during the "flood," where students offered help, showed this gap: while Chand thought it was a kind act, one anonymous student mentioned in the article felt like a "slave," revealing their very different experiences and interpretations.

The statement *"it was a sort of cultural exploitation on the professor's part"* summed up this clash of unconscious beliefs. Chand did not intend to exploit anyone; instead, his strong cultural understanding of give-and-take created a situation that seemed exploitative when seen from another cultural viewpoint. The highlighted phrases "I felt threatened" and "He said our student visas would be revoked if we did not listen to him," marked in black ink, illustrated how Chand's interpretation of his own lighthearted jokes clashed with the students' feelings of anxiety regarding power and consequences.

Chand embarked on a deep journey into feelings of shame and the breakdown of his ideal self-image. The public humiliation he faced, highlighted by the front-page story and hurtful anonymous comments online, destroyed the self-image he had built as a respected professor and kind-hearted person. The phrase *"ink blackened the tips of his fingers"* showed how public disgrace clung to him like a stain.

His constant re-reading of the article and efforts to buy every available copy were desperate attempts to regain control over his life and narrative. This behavior, which he craved "just like his morning tea," highlighted how troubled he felt mentally and how trapped he was in his own suffering. Losing his classes and lab work stripped away more of his professional identity, leaving him feeling lost.

When he noticed the pity in Raji's eyes—*"Even if he bought and burned every copy in town, people could still read the story on their laptops or phones"*—it emphasized that judgment in today's digital world was unavoidable, deepening his shame. His reaction towards Raji, saying "If I am guilty, then you are too," illustrated a common psychological response where he shifted his intense anger and shame onto someone nearby. This moment also revealed his hidden wish to share the weight of what he felt was his wrongdoing, lessening his isolation in suffering.

In the end, Chand's choice to accept his resignation, even after some negotiations, marked a major shift in his self-esteem. He had to let go of his former role as a respected professor and face the harsh truth of a public story that clashed with how he saw himself. His final thoughts—*"What about the truth of who I am and how I've lived? This isn't something that can be measured on*

paper. It's not about salary, totals, awards, or grants. It's a feeling, a sense of who I once was, that is being erased and rewritten without my input"—highlighted the deep identity crisis caused by these events. Losing that "feeling, a sense of himself" showed how completely his ideal self had been shattered and revealed the painful journey he faced in redefining who he was under public scrutiny.

CONCLUSION

Sindya Bhanoo's *A Life of America* provides a touching psychological exploration of a man struggling with a split identity, the challenges of cross-cultural relationships, and the lasting effects of hidden motivations. Chandrasekharan's transformation from a kind mentor to someone publicly shamed is not just a tale of supposed exploitation; it delves deep into the human mind. Using psychoanalytic theory, we see that Chand's kindness was unknowingly influenced by his own unresolved feelings of loneliness and desire as a young immigrant, which showed up as countertransference. Although his actions came from a real wish to assist others, they were affected by a superego rooted in traditional Indian values. This created conflict with the changing expectations and rights-based views of his students, who were shaped by different cultural norms. This mismatch in unconscious cultural beliefs led to accusations of "cultural exploitation."

Chand's reaction to this crisis displayed classic defense mechanisms: denial, projection, rationalization, repression, and undoing—all aimed at shielding his fragile self-image from the painful truth of public judgment and feelings of betrayal. Raji, with her quiet yet insightful perspective, acted as a steady presence, subtly challenging Chand's denial and ultimately offering him much-needed support during his tough times. On the other hand, John, the self-interested dean, underscored the outside pressures that contributed to Chand's fall from grace, showing how self-preservation often takes priority under institutional strain. Arun's changing feelings—from initial gratitude to later discomfort—represented the generational and cultural gap that Chand did not fully recognize. *A Life of America* showed how deeply shame can affect a person's self-image. Chand's repeated reading of the article and his unsuccessful efforts to make it disappear highlighted the serious emotional pain he felt from having his identity changed without his input. Even though he resigned with financial stability, this decision symbolized the loss of his professional and public self, forcing him to face a new reality filled with self-reflection and lower self-esteem. The story wrapped up not by resolving any legal issues but by focusing on Chand's personal struggle, as he quietly accepted his damaged sense of self and began the hard journey of figuring out who he was without his old identity.

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