



Exploring Junior Cycle Texts

Family Life by Akhil Sharma

Family Life by Akhil Sharma is a novel included as part of the Prescribed Material for Junior Cycle English (For the student cohorts commencing Junior Cycle in 2023, 2024, 2025, 2026 and 2027 and presenting for examination in 2026, 2027 and 2028, 2029 and 2030).

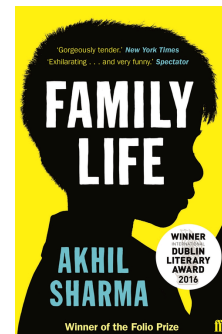


Image courtesy of
Faber UK

Please note:

- The following tasks might be completed over a series of lessons.
- You may like to adapt and adjust the tasks to suit your context.
- *Family Life* covers themes which could be considered sensitive and controversial. You may wish to consult with our READY Framework to support you in your study.



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for this Text

Before you read... (Teacher Guidance)

1. Visual Prediction



Delhi 1970s

Image courtesy of *Flickr*



NYC 1970s

Image courtesy of
The New York Times

In groups, guide students to discuss what life might have felt like in each place and time.

Prompt Questions to ask:

- What differences do you notice?
- What might be exciting or frightening about moving from one place to the other?
- How might a child feel leaving one home for another?

2. Context Exploration

Assign groups to find and summarise in 2–3 sentences what The Emergency was in India. Have each group share one key fact or consequence.

3. Vocabulary Builder

Present the following key words/phrases from the extract (without full sentences):

emigrate - suspended - the constitution - frugality - incense stick - clerk - billboards

In pairs, have students discuss potential meanings or origins based on what they already know. Finally, reveal or discuss the actual definitions as a class.



Extract

Background: The novel takes place in the 1940s in the Gulf Stream off the coast of Cuba. Santiago, an old fisherman, has been locked in a long, exhausting struggle with a giant marlin. In this extract, we see the fisherman struggle to make his first catch in over 84 days.

My mother had no interest in emigrating for herself. She was a high school teacher of economics, and she liked her job. She said that teaching was the best job possible, that one received respect and one learned things as well as taught them. Yet my mother was aware that the West could provide me and my brother with opportunities. Then came the Emergency. After Indira Gandhi suspended the constitution and put thousands of people in jail, my parents, like nearly everyone, lost faith in the government. Before then, my parents, even my father, were proud enough of India being independent that when they saw a cloud, they would think, That's an Indian cloud. After the Emergency, they began to feel that even though they were ordinary and not likely to get into trouble with the government, it might still be better to leave.

In 1978, my father left for America.

In America, my father began working as a clerk for a government agency he rented an apartment in a place called queens NY a year after he left us, he sent airplane tickets. The Delhi of the seventies is hard to imagine: The quietness, the streets empty of traffic, children playing cricket in the middle of the street and rarely having to move out of the way to let cars by, the vegetable vendors who came pushing their carts down the street in the late afternoon, crying out their wares in tight high pitched voices. There weren't VCRs back then, let alone cable channels. A movie would play for twenty-five or fifty weeks in huge auditorium theatres and then once the movie was gone, it was gone forever. I remember feeling grief when the enormous billboards for Sholay at the end of our street were taken down it was like somebody had died.

It is also hard to remember how frugal we were. Our mothers used it to make wicks. This frugality meant that we were sensitive to the physical reality of our world in a way most people are known no longer are. When my mother bought a box of matches, she had my brother sit at a table and use a razor to split the matches in half. When we had to light several things, we would use the match to set a twist of paper on fire and then walk around the apartment lighting the stove, the incense stick, the mosquito coil. This close engagement with things meant that we were conscious that the wood of a match is soft, that a bit of spit on the paper slows down how it burns.

By the time our airplane tickets arrived, not every family hired a band to play outside their house on the day of their departure to a foreign country. Still many families did.



Activities Based on Extract (Teacher Guidance)

These prompts are designed to support close reading and personal response. They may be used orally or in writing, individually or in groups.

1. Perspective Shift

Invite pupils to write a short paragraph from the mother's perspective, explaining her thoughts about leaving India.

2. Sensory Memories

Ask pupils to highlight or list the sights, sounds, and feelings described in the speaker's memories. In pairs, guide them to discuss which senses the author uses to bring the memory to life, then select one image and explain how it helps readers picture life in 1970s Delhi.

3. Change and Memory

Direct pupils to answer questions about the changes described in the extract, including:

- What kinds of changes does the narrator describe — personal, family, or cultural?
- How do you think he feels about these changes?

After the discussion, prompt pupils to write about a time when their own family life or surroundings changed significantly.

Reflect and Respond (Teacher Guidance)

These activities extend engagement with the extract and invite creative and personal responses. Use individually, in pairs, or in groups.

1. Delhi in the 1970s

In this extract, the writer vividly describes what life was like in Delhi in the 1970s. Guide pupils in writing an essay explaining how the writer uses language and imagery to create a strong sense of time and place.

In pupils answers they could consider:

- Descriptions of sounds, smells, or sights
- Specific memories (like matches, billboards, or vendors)
- The emotions these memories create

2. Critical Reflection

Invite students to choose one moment from the extract which they think changed the narrator or his family forever. They could describe what happens, explain its importance, and discuss what it tells us about family life, memory, or identity. Encourage pupils to use evidence, analyse why the moment matters and reflect personally on the whether change is positive or negative.

3. Personal Response

Challenge pupils to consider what “home” means. As a class or individually, mind map some ideas. Then, have students wrote a personal response about what “home” means in general and to them.

4. Persuasive Writing

Provide pupils with the prompt below and guide them in writing a persuasive response exploring the idea of change. Prompt: *Change is always hard for people.*