

# The Hemingway Effect

By AKHIL SHARMA

How Ernest Hemingway shaped an Indian American writer's craft and consciousness.

I can only speak from my own experiences, and so I should not be understood to represent all Indian American writers.

I first started writing short stories in ninth grade. I did this because I was very unhappy and I wanted attention.

My family came to America in 1979. There was me, my brother, my mother and my father. Two years after we arrived, my brother had an accident in a swimming pool that left him severely brain damaged. I was 10 then, and my brother, 14.

My brother is still alive and he cannot walk or talk. Anup...cannot be fed through his mouth, and so he is fed through a gastrointestinal tube....

For two years after the accident, my brother was kept in a hospital, and then my parents decided to take care of him themselves. ...Other than the direct worries of my brother's condition, another pressing worry that I grew up with was concern about money. Because we had such little money and because we were dependent on insurance companies and nurses, we felt that we were always being betrayed, that people were not fulfilling their responsibilities....

Until ninth grade, when I was 15, the only time I wrote short stories was when they were assigned for a class. In ninth grade I had a teacher, Mrs. Green, who praised me for how well I understood our reading assignments and so, to get more attention from her, I began writing stories.

At first all the stories I wrote had white American characters. I think this was partially because all the fiction I read was about white people. Equally important though was that I felt the experience of being an Indian American was not important. Living as a minority, not sharing the experiences of the majority population, I felt that my experiences, because they were not the majority experience, were not as important as those of white people. Also, to some extent, I felt that my experiences, because they were not shared, were

## For more information:

An extract from Akhil Sharma's *Mother and Son*

<http://www.bestyoungnovelists.com/Akhil-Sharma/Read-an-extract-from-Mother-and-Son>

Ernest Hemingway

<http://www.timelesshemingway.com/>

not even as real as those of white Americans.

Among the problems I had in writing about whites is that I didn't know anything about whites. It was only in 10th grade that I first went into a white person's house.

In 10th grade I read a biography of Ernest Hemingway. I remember starting reading it one morning at the kitchen table and the windows of the kitchen being dark. I read the biography...so that I could lie to people and tell them that I had read Hemingway's books. (I used to lie all the time and claim I had read books I had not.)

I read the book and was amazed. What amazed me was that Hemingway had gotten to live in France and Spain, that he had travelled to Cuba and appeared to have had a good time in his life. Till then I had thought that I would be a computer programmer or an engineer or a doctor. When I read the book, I suddenly thought that I could have a lifestyle like Ernest Hemingway's and not lead a boring life.

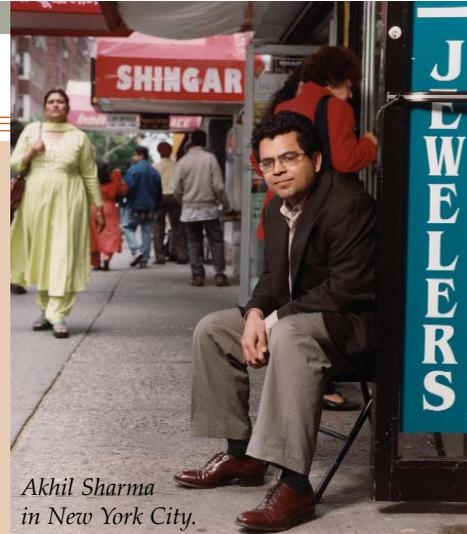
---

***An Obedient Father*** by Akhil Sharma is available at the American Library in New Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai and Mumbai.

---

After I read the biography, I began to read other books about Hemingway. I read biographies and collections of critical essays. I must have read 20 books about Hemingway before I read any actual work written by him. I read all this about Hemingway because I wanted to learn how to repeat what he had done and I didn't want to leave any clue unexamined. At first, I was not actually interested in Hemingway's own writing.

I think of Hemingway as the writer who has influenced me most. Hemingway...wrote about characters whose experience was exotic to American readers. He wrote about gangsters and soldiers in Italy and journalists in Paris. Among the many things I learned from Hemingway, and I could say that almost everything I am as a writer began with Hemingway or as a response against Hemingway, one was how to write about exotic things without being bogged down by the exoticism. Scholars who analyzed Hemingway pointed out that his stories



Akhil Sharma  
in New York City.

began in the middle of the action, that he wrote as if the reader already knew a great deal about the environment that he was writing about, that when he gave direct explanations, this breaking of the reality of fictional experience was a way of saying to the reader that the reason I am breaking this fictional convention is because I don't want to lie.

For me, because I began my education as a writer with Hemingway and did not really read any nonwhite writers until I was in college, I have always thought that writing is just writing. Writing is just a string of words and a series of strategies that generate experiences within the reader. I have always felt that in the same way that the race of a surgeon does not matter because a heart and a gall bladder remain a heart and a gall bladder no matter the race of the patient, the race of a writer also does not matter.

I came to America as part of a great wave of immigration. Because this wave of Asian immigrants has created curiosity within American society as to what exactly it is like to be in Asian families, I have been lucky to have had my books read. (I think of myself as a good writer, but I could imagine that if I had been writing 50 years earlier, my writing might have been too exotic and peripheral to be worth reading by ordinary readers.)

My first book [*An Obedient Father*] won the PEN/ Hemingway prize [in 2000]. This is given to the best first novel published in any given year.

The person who gave me the prize was one of Hemingway's sons.... This white-haired gentleman and I sat and talked in a conference room for about 10 or 15 minutes. I did not tell him how much his father had mattered to me because I felt shy. Instead we talked about how his father had found titles for his books in *The Book of Common Prayer*.

Sometimes when I think of how lucky I have been, I want to cry.



New Delhi-born Akhil Sharma writes for *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic*. He was named among the best young American novelists by *Granta* magazine in 2007.