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A CRITICAL STUDY OF “AND THE MOUNTAINS ECHOED” CONSIDERING THE EFFECT OF THE AFGHAN DIASPORA ON IDENTITY

BAGISHA SHARMA

PG scholar, Department of English. SCD Govt. College, Ludhiana.

bagishasharma.16@gmail.com



BAGISHA SHARMA

ABSTRACT

The book is written in a collection of short stories, with each of the nine chapters being told from the viewpoint of a different character. The foundation of the novel is built on the relationship between ten-year-old Abdullah and his three-year-old sister Pari, and a father's decision to sell his daughter to a childless couple in Kabul, an event that ties the various narratives together. The separation of the two siblings, Abdullah and Pari, is "the soul of the book", who subsequently become "victims of the passage of time". However, towards the end of the book, Pari is informed that she was adopted and that she has an elder brother, she locates him only to discover that he is suffering from Alzheimer's disease. This novel deviates from Hosseini's classic style which is observed from his first two works through his choice to avoid focusing on any one character and making them morally ambiguous. There are inputs of various characters that help in elevating the novel to a different level. The settings dart from Shadbagh to Kabul to Paris to Silicon Valley to the tiny Greek island of Tinos, back and forth in time from 1949 to 2010, to encompass the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the rule of the Taliban and the Nato-led war. The novel is about the sprawling family saga that sails through the mountains (obstacles) of love, displacement of cultural identity, separation, and truancy of familial love.

Key Words: Diaspora, interconnectedness, time, memory, art, compassion, family.

Khaled Hosseini was born in Kabul, Afghanistan, in 1965. In 1976, the Foreign Ministry relocated the Hosseini family to Paris. They were ready to return to Kabul in 1980, but by then their homeland had witnessed a bloody communist coup and the invasion of the Soviet Army. The Hosseini's sought and were granted political asylum in the United States. Hosseini had enrolled at Santa Clara University, where he earned a bachelor's degree in biology in 1988. He completed his residency at Cedars-Sinai medical center in Los Angeles. In March 2001, while practicing medicine, Hosseini began writing his first novel, *The Kite Runner*. Published by Riverhead Books in 2003, that debut went on to

become an international bestseller and beloved classic, sold in at least seventy countries and spending more than a hundred weeks on the New York Times bestseller list. In May 2007, his second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, debuted at #1 on the New York Times bestseller list. Hosseini's much-awaited third novel, *And the Mountains Echoed*, was published on May 21, 2013. His new novel, may have the most awkward title in his body of work, but it's his most assured and emotionally gripping story yet, more fluent and ambitious than *The Kite Runner* (2003), more narratively complex than *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007). The title was inspired by William Blake's poem "Nurse's Song:

Innocence," which refers to hills reverberating with the sound of children's voices. It grapples with many of the same themes that crisscross his current novel: the relationship between parents and children, the course about how the past can haunt the present and the effects of the war. Hosseini is a victim of cultural displacement. His writings well depict the essence of diaspora. The longing for his homeland reverberate through this novels and his words flow with the feel to aspire and ignite the people of his own kind and society. Hosseini structures his novel following the lines of the famous "thought experiment" that suggests that the flapping of a butterfly's wing could trigger a chain of events that causes a hurricane on the other side of the world. The novel consists of nine chapters, each written from the stance of a different character. Instead of unfolding like a conventional novel with a small number of characters interacting with each other for the entire book, Hosseini's book cuts alternating many different characters, many of whom don't know each other, or are only dimly aware of each other's existence and all this takes place over the course of many decades. The author through this instantly relatable novel paints generations of a troubled family across the Middle East.

The opening story of the novel has a mythical, allegorical tone. Hosseini begins in an ambiguous mode, without revealing the identity of his narrator at all. We have almost no information about the real characters before we are brought into the world of this fairy tale. It's assumed that the narrator's story will be important and emblematic, and will set the tone for the novel to follow. In the fairy tale, a farmer named Baba Ayub is forced to sacrifice his favorite son, Qais, to an evil spirit called the div (a monster that devours small children). Ayub, furious with himself for giving up his own child, decides to hunt down the div. Eventually, he traces the div to a beautiful palace, in which he finds Qais playing happily with his friends. The div explains to Baba Ayub that it has provided Qais with a pleasant home and good upbringing. It grants Ayub two options: take Qais home, or allow him to stay. Hesitatingly, Baba Ayub decides to let Qais stay. The choice is blunt; it's a fixture of parenting and a dominant theme of this book. Fairy

tales are often dark and frightening to begin with, and end with an upbeat tone, but there seems to be a more specific reason why the storyteller has chosen a story about sacrificing one's child. The fairy tale moves on, with Ayub leaving the palace, the div, sympathetic to Ayub's guilt, gives him a bottle of liquid that makes him forget that he ever had a son named Qais. The div's bottle, one might say, symbolizes man's intrinsic ability to forget and move on. It's often pointed out that forgetting is one of mankind's most powerful weapons of self-preservation. If people didn't have the power to forget their misdeeds, then they'd collapse with guilt and self-hatred. Now an old fragile man, Ayub returns to his home. Although he's forgotten about Qais almost entirely, he sometimes hears the sounds of his son, sounds that he has no way of understanding anymore. Baba Ayub's guilt at having sacrificed his son is understandable because he was not able to give Qais a good life but it's never explained why, exactly, the div feels the need to test Baba Ayub. Probably in the fairy tale, the div is the embodiment of the cold, uncaring universe, which often subjects human beings to sadistic choices, to which there are simply no easy answers. The key point of this section is that Baba Ayub can't entirely forget the decision he was forced to make, he is still haunted by a vague sadness that he cannot explain. This suggests a broader point about humanity, shares a penchant of mapping terrain midway between the boldly colored world of fable and the more shadowy, shaded world of realism. It's a poignant idea that will recur throughout the novel to come, making the story of the div especially symbolic.

Recollecting the fable, we recognize that Saboor is the narrator, and he is telling this story just before he gives away his daughter Pari for adoption to the affluent Wahdatis. It is almost as if the fable is predicting Saboor and Abdullah's (Pari's elder brother) future sadness. This is also an early example of the art of storytelling as a method of transforming and dealing with one's pain. It is easier for Saboor to see himself as sacrificing Pari to a powerful demon (the Wahdatis) than accepting the reality that he is selling her to get money for his family and provide a decent upbringing for her. Pari

is left with them to grow up with all the privileges of wealth and luxury; Mrs. Wahdati separates Abdullah and Pari, and in order to subaltern Abdullah's misery she says, "It's for the best." (45) In the decades to come, Pari will grow up in Paris with Nila, a sometime poet and full-time narcissist who leaves her husband behind in Kabul to lead a self-indulgent, bohemian life impossible in Afghanistan, only later to commit suicide. Pari becomes a mathematician, marries a drama teacher and has three children. All her life, Mr. Hosseini writes, Pari has felt "the absence of something, or someone, fundamental to her own existence" (189) sometimes "it was vague, like a message sent across shadowy by ways and vast distances, a weak signal on a radio dial, remote, warbled. Other times it felt so clear, this absence, so intimately close it made her heart lurch." (189)

Abdullah was 10, and his beloved baby sister, Pari, was 3 when the Wahdatis took her away claiming it to be the best decision. He had taken care of her since their mother died giving birth to Pari. Hosseini writes. "That was his purpose, he believed, the reason God had made him, so he would be there to take care of Pari." (31) Abdullah is completely wrecked with the proceedings at Kabul on his return journey to Shadbagh with his father. His soul wreathed with the thought that he will never be able to see his beloved little sister again. The beginning of this chapter comes as a shock, both to us and to Abdullah. Nevertheless, Abdullah continues to love Pari more than anyone else. One day, he finds a small yellow feather, of the kind that Pari was once fond of collecting. Instead of throwing the feather away, he keeps it for himself, vowing to give it to Pari himself one day. The yellow feather will come to be a heartrending symbol of memory and forgetting, like Qais's bell in the div story. Abdullah is utterly devoted to Pari, for reasons that he can't put into words. Hosseini narrates these events through a child's perspective. To quote, "Just as he didn't understand why a wave of something, something like the tail end of a sad dream, always swept through him whenever he heard the jingling, surprising him each time like an unexpected gust of wind. But then it passed, as all things do. It passed." (15) This episode also provides a real-world example of the deliberate forgetting we saw in

the div story: when confronted by crisis, most people try to forget their pain but can't let go. As for Abdullah, he ends up in California, running a restaurant called Abe's Kabob House. He and his wife have named their only child Pari, after his long-lost sister. After her mother dies, and her father begins to suffer from dementia, Pari II (younger) decides to postpone her dreams of going to art school to take care of her ailing father and it's the same Pari who has a vivid dream of reuniting her father with his missing sibling who embrace each other tenderly. The author closes with an image drawn from a dream to express love's centrality and contingency. It is as if a snapshot of bygone happiness which is all the more precious in retrospection.

Hosseini continues to structure his chapters in a way that every chapter has almost its own vignette, an outlook and different characters. The myriad cast of characters can get confounding, but it also highlights the diversity of Afghanistan and the globalized world. Creating a kind of an echo chamber, Mr. Hosseini gives us an array of other tales that mirror the stories of Abdullah and Pari. There's the story of their stepmother, Parwana, and her beautiful sister Masooma, who was originally supposed to become Saboor's betrothed; the story of Parwana's brother, Nabi, who becomes a caretaker of his ailing employer and kind of brother to Suleiman also the secret-keeper of the his scattered family; the story of the brash, fast-talking Timur Bashiri, whose family used to live down the street from the Wahdatis, and his subjective cousin Idris; and the story of a Greek doctor named Markos who has moved to Kabul to operate on children who have been injured in the war, and his childhood soul mate, Thalia, who now cares for Markos's aging mother back home in Greece. In recapitulating these tales, Mr. Hosseini effortlessly uses ruse and cheesy melodrama to press every sentimental button he can.

Dr. Markos Varvaris has been a peripheral character in this novel ever since he had learned that he is the recipient of Nabi's letter; which read the disconsolate story of Nabi and the appalling disengagement of the Saboor family. At the end of the letter, Markos was asked to try and locate his

niece (Pari) to whom he left all his belongings including the Wahdati ancestral house and apologize to her the misdeeds caused by his ignorance. "As you can see enclosed in the envelope along with this letter is my will, in which I leave the house, the money ... And please tell her that I cannot know the myriad consequences of what I set into motion ... I took solace only in hope." (131). Many years later, when Pari who is an elderly woman and is barely able to walk, she receives a call from Marko Varvaris, who discloses her that she, has a brother named Abdullah. As she digests this news, she feels a strange sense of connection with her sibling, a sense that she had forgotten about for decades and the humming of the childhood lullaby felt familiar to her existence. It's extremely satisfying, in the dramatic sense, to see Pari receiving this news at last, after decades of oblivion. At the same time it's also a huge blow to the reader about the notion of her identity, as everything we thought she knew about her past was basically inaccurate. Just as Baba Ayub can't entirely forget his son, Qais, Pari can't entirely forget about Abdullah, even though she hadn't seen him since she was four years old. The power of love and memory is justified. In a sense, "And the Mountains Echoed" is a novel about the conflict between love and forgetfulness. Although there are many different characters and stories in the book, arguably the "central" story is that of Pari and her brother Abdullah, who are separated at a young age.

In the final chapter of the book, Abdullah's daughter, Pari II, explains how her father reunited with Pari, her aunt and namesake. From her growing up years, Pari II had a certain inclination towards Pari, all the stories and memories she had heard from her father about his childhood were ingrained in her soul. She used to relate herself with Pari every now and then, as if they both were the same entity. To quote, 'And so Baba's little sister, Pari, was my secret companion, invisible to everyone but me. She was my sister, the one I'd always wished my parents had given me. I saw her in the bathroom mirror when we brushed our teeth ... We dressed together. ... sat close to me in class ..., I could always spot the black of her hair and the white of her profile out of the corner of my eye.'(347) Through these lines we

get to evaluate the intense bond Pari II had with her namesake, having never met her, she constantly felt her powerful presence around as if they grew up together. The technique used by the author is quiet poignant and candied. "A story is like a moving train, no matter where we hop onboard, we are bound to reach our destination sooner or later."(74) After the recent findings by Pari, she calls Pari II, and arranges for a meet in California, where they were settled. The reuniting of Pari and Abdullah, at first is skeptical. It's a scene of reconciliation. Abdullah stubbornly refuses to believe that the woman standing next to him is his beloved sister. It's clear in this moment that Abdullah is suffering from Alzheimer brought on by old age. This is heartbreaking for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that Abdullah has always been able to remember Pari, his little sister, no matter how many decades elapsed. Now, he forgets his own Pari, not because he doesn't care about her but because his body and mind simply aren't strong enough to relate the past with the present. After many conversations he realizes the truth when Pari sings him the song; their childhood lullaby, which Abdullah used to sing her when they were both children. "I found a sad little fairy, beneath the shade of a paper tree/I know a sad little fairy, who was blown away by the wind one night."(21) For the last and most important time in the novel, art helps people come together. By singing the same childhood lullaby, Abdullah and Pari realize to a certainty that they're siblings and not strangers. By remembering this rhyme, the two siblings not only confirm who they are in a literal, straightforward sense, but they also "unlock" other memories of each other, of which they'd previously been only dimly aware. However, this happy reunion doesn't last long, as Abdullah begins to lose his memory. This note is a tragic encapsulation of the heartlessness of time it keeps on moving, erasing memories of loved ones. Pari and Abdullah can't ever know each other perfectly, there will always be things separating them (age, time, distance). But the image of Abdullah and Pari pressed close together implies that perhaps it's enough that they were together for a short time. "She turns her face to look at him, her big brother, her ally in all things ... She is happy enough to be

near him, with him ... her brother, and as a nap slowly steals her away, she feels herself engulfed in a wave of absolute calm.”(402) In the end, when Pari II and Pari decide to take a trip together to Paris, Pari II comes across a small box that belongs to her father. Inside it, she finds the yellow feather her father had kept decades ago. Next to the feather, she finds the three scribbled sentences, dated shortly after Abdullah learned he was losing his memory, explaining that “They tell me I must wade into waters, where I will soon drown. Before I march in, I leave this on the shore for you. I pray you find it, sister, so you will know what was in my heart as I went under. There is a date too. August 2007.” (400) in a profound sense, Abdullah had made this note keeping in mind the forthcoming events in his life. He never gave up on Pari and lived with this belief of meeting her at some point of his life; he spent his entire lifetime waiting to see Pari again.

Hosseini steers the reader toward a frustrating, moving, but ultimately peaceful conclusion. The siblings are united and Pari II meets her long lost soul sister. Hosseini establishes the importance of the bond between two siblings, one of the most important kinds of relationship in the book. There is also complex moral issue that the author struggles with throughout the novel. The novel spans nearly 60 years of Afghan history as it investigates the consequences of a desperate act that scars two young lives and resonates through many others. As the plot advances, we see the devastation of war and its impact on areas in Afghanistan through descriptions such as Nabi's account of the damage that is not only inflicted upon the Wahdati estate but also the rest of Kabul during Soviet and US interventions. We have the story of two cousins; introspective Idris and narcissistic Timur who return to Afghanistan from San Jose over two decades later in 2003. On being asked, they claimed to reconnect and see their former home ravaged by war, veiling their real intention which was to reclaim their family home in Kabul because now foreign-aid workers were looking for places to live in Kabul and property values were sky rocketing. While visiting the Wahdati estate which is now being used as a hospital, Idris meets Roshi, moved by her tragic

story, he befriends her. Idris begins to set up plans to pay for her surgery in America, but upon returning home, he loses that drive, distances himself only to blend back into his previous life. A year later it is revealed that Timur pays for Roshi's surgery, when he comes across Roshi's bestselling memoir. Hosseini quite adroitly tries to equate and convey the western inadvertent attitude with the prevailing political anarchy and discord in Afghanistan through the bond between Idris and Roshi. Idris had the opportunity to make a sacrifice in order to help Roshi and feel morally superior to Timur but due to lack of conviction and fractured nature of his diasporic self he fails to assist her. Such a relationship could be viewed as an assessment of the inconsiderate western intervention that uses big words such as good deeds and moral authority and pretend to help the war zone victims but only practice half-hearted measures. Such measures gradually develop to become nothing but paltry lip service and create resentment among victims. In the coming chapters we are made to come across the story of a 12 year old son of a warlord who has commandeered the Saboor family's village; now leaving them with no space to settle or make a living from. Each narrator adds the depth to the brutality faced by the Afghani people and increases the empathy towards them. The focus on multiple characters allows the readers to gain a better understanding of the diversities of Afghan culture.

“And the Mountains Echoed” offers a nuanced theory of time, memory, and forgetting. In the hands of most writers, such narrative manipulations would result in some truly cringe-worthy moments. Mr. Hosseini manages not only to avoid this but accurately succeed in spinning his characters' lives into a deeply affecting choral work is a testament both to his intimate knowledge of their inner lives, and to his power as an old-fashioned storyteller. He has suffered the fatality of diaspora and broken homes, which speaks well through his novel. From the beginning the novel is presented to us in a nebulous, unclear way, Hosseini reiterates one of his most important points: everyone has a story to tell, but sometimes, it takes a while to hear it. He builds up his characters in heaps and bounds but doesn't let them detach from

their roots. He has also used the technique of Hypodiegesis, a story told within another story. Mr. Hosseini's narrative gifts have deepened over the years, enabling him to anchor firmly the more maudlin aspects of his tales in genuine emotion and fine-grained details. The novelist when he was fifteen, moved to California from Afghanistan, speaking no English whatsoever. Hosseini refers to his own childhood in the United States. He talks about his time in the U.S. as extremely uncomfortable and alienating, so it's no surprise that his characters speak of their adolescences in America in the similar terms. We finish this novel with an intimate understanding of who his characters are and how they've defined themselves over the years through the choices they have made between duty and freedom, familial responsibilities and independence, loyalty to home and exile abroad. Few lines from Forough Farrokhzad's poem "Rebirth" would be apt to recount.

Life perhaps, is that long, shady road/where every day; a woman wanders-with her basket of fruits. (11-14)

Life is indeed a long, shady road filled with opportunities and risks on unforeseen lands; depending on the attitude of the traveler to risk by taking chances or letting go of situations like introspective Idris, weak Saboor and nescient uncle Nabi. The novel moves on with its vast characterization through the prism of sibling relationships, a theme refracted through the lives of several pairs of brothers and sisters. All this, is played out against the backdrop of Afghanistan's tumultuous history, from the pre-Soviet era through the years of the mujahedeen's fight against the Soviet Union, the rise of the Taliban and the American invasion after the terrorist attacks of 2011. Afghanistan lies sore and wounded by war, by the plunder of local destruction and international intervention, driven by the dependencies of foreign aid to fuel the disrupted economy and the alienation of widely dispersed diaspora. Hosseini through his novel makes an effort to resurrect and enlighten the world the Afghanistan that was in its true dimension, which is now buried under layers of war, the Soviet invasion, the Taliban incursion, and the American intrusion.

In 2006, Hosseini was named a Goodwill Envoy to UNHCR, the United Nations Refugee Agency. Inspired by a trip he made to Afghanistan with the UNHCR, he later established The Khaled Hosseini Foundation, a 501(c) (3) nonprofit, which provides humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan. He presently lives in Northern California.

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