

A CRITICAL STUDY OF KHALED HOSSEIN'S NOVEL 'AND THE MOUNTAIN ECHOED'

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Khaled Hosseini is an Afghan-American writer. He has set the bar high with his first two novels, *The Kite Runner* (2003) and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2009). *The Mountains Echoed* (2013) is his third novel. Like the first two novels, this one is emotive, at times poetic and touching, and gives insight into Afghan culture. But most importantly this book is about guilt. It is about the weight that characters pull on their backs all their life. They are in constant struggle to break shackles that never existed. The story unfolds by telling of the subsequent ramifications that stem from the single line in the fable, 'A finger had to be cut to save the hand'. The characters circle back and question this flawed logic. The stories are bound together by time, and the common theme of guilt. And we find that almost each story has a story of finger cutting.

The first chapter opens in 1952 in a small Afghan village Shadbagh, where a poor day laborer, Saboor, lives with his second wife Parwana and children, ten year old Abdullah and three year-old Pari. Abdullah's mother died giving birth to Pari. Now his father has walked Abdullah and Pari for two days across miles of desert, from their tiny village to the great city of Kabul. Saboor intends to find work with his brother-in-law, Nabi, who is employed by a rich, well-connected family, Suleiman and Nila Wahdati. During the journey of Kabul he tells a story about a *div* who eats children, and a poor man Ayub. According to story, the families each sacrifice one of their children so that the rest will be spared. When it comes Ayub's turn, he serves his most loving son Quash to devil to save rest of the family. Saboor ends the story by saying "A finger had to be cut to save the hand". Abdullah and Pari are very excited about the new city. The children are unaware that Saboor also plans to sell Pari to the Wahdatis. He does this in order to save his family from the extremely harsh winter, which had killed his infant son in the previous year. After returning from Kabul Abdullah remembers a line from father's story. Now he came to know the real motive of telling that particular story. Pari was a finger who has been cut by her father to save the rest of the family.

As the novel progress we find that fingers are sliced off in almost every chapter. In chapter three there is a story of Parwana and her sister Masooma. They are twin sisters and love the same man Saboor, Abdullah's father. One day when they were swinging on oak tree, Masooma discloses her love story to Parwana. Parwana out of jealousy pushed Masooma off the branch which broke her spine and made her dependent on Parwana for rest of her life. Now it's Parwana's duty to take care of her paralyzed sister. After the death of Saboor's wife Masooma forces her to marry him. She says, "Be happy, Parwana, please be happy. Do it for me (69)". She plans a journey to Kabul and at night she asks Parwana to leave her in the middle of nowhere with an overdose of opium. At first Parwana says, "You can't ask me to do this." But at last, she

makes her choice, goes back, leaving Masooma to die in the winter of desert, “She pictures her twin sister lying by the fire, alone in the dark. Soon the fire will die, and Masooma will be cold (71)”. She chooses life on the cost of her sister. On the other hand, Masooma sacrificed her life to give her lover Saboor a wife to maintain his withered family and to Parwana her childhood love.

Fourth chapter opens with the posthumous letter of Navi, to Markos. Navi is Abdullah and Pari’s step uncle and cook cum chauffeur of Wahdati’s family to whom Pari was sold. The letter portrays life of Navi with Suleiman and Neela. All his life he yearned for Neela and Suleiman for him. Suleiman married Neela even being known to her adulterous nature. Marriage was an unhappy one. After Pari’s adoption they came close though not as a couple but as a parent. When life started to move smoothly, one day Suleiman get an attack which paralyzed half of his body. After this accident Neela stopped to see him. And very soon she with Pari left for Paris. She abandoned her husband when he needed her most. She knew that she can n’t spoil her life and youth for a paralytic. So it’s wise to cut the finger before it starts to harm your hand. On the other hand Navi took the complete responsibility of Suleiman and live with him till his last breath. In this letter he makes a request to Markos, “...if you look for a short while you will find Suleiman Wahdati’s grave. Find me a plot nearby and bury me there. This is all I ask for myself (130)”. He lived all his life to cure a finger though it was not so hard to cut it.

Chapter five opens with the story of Amara, Roshi and Idris. Amara is a nurse providing her services as an aid worker in Kabul. In hospital she becomes attached to a little girl Roshi. Roshi’s uncle massacred her complete family. He also attacked on Roshi with an axe which left her crown parted in two. Now she needs a major operation. Idris is an Afghan-American doctor who comes to claim his house in Kabul. In a party Amara shares Roshi’s accident with Idris. He starts visiting Roshi in hospital. Idris in the heat of passion had promised to Roshi that he will talk to his chief about surgery and if he did not get funds, he’d pay the cost, from his own pocket. After returning from Kabul, Idris feels that there isn’t much fun in the silent life of America. But as his life took off again, he was weighed down by his own commitment. He talks to his chief about Roshi’s surgery. Surprisingly he felt relieved when he received a negative response from the chief for his plea to treat Roshi. Now he had bought his excuse, his escape but deals with the discomfort and guilt of failing to help a young girl as he had promised to do. He consoles himself by saying, “ In the nineties, when half the men he knew were out clubbing and chasing women, he had been buried in study dragging himself through hospital corridors at two in the morning, forgetting leisure, comfort , sleep. He had given his twenties to medicine. He has paid his dues. Why should he feel badly? This is his family. This is his life (170).” So it’s sensible to forget that intimacy and the promise, “Something best forgotten. He isn’t capable of it. It’s that simple.... ” Idris feels that it’s right time to cut the finger to save the hand. After all this is the matter of the comfort of his own family. He deleted Amara’s e-mails without reading them.

Chapter six opens with Nila Wahdati’s interview given to magazine *Parallaxe*. This discloses the life of Nila and adult Pari in Paris. As usual Nila is engaged with a very young Julien. Very soon she became fade up with her affair and Pari fall in love with the same man. Pari shifted to Julien’s apartment leaving her mother. It was dead shock for Nila. She expresses her feeling to interviewer, “Everything I’ve done, I’ve done for my daughter. Not that she understands, or appreciates, the full measure of what I’ve done for her. She can be breathtakingly thoughtless, my daughter. If she knew the life she would have had to endure...I’ve come to believe she’s my punishment (216).” May be she has expected that Pari will fill the vacuums of her life; bring an end to all the drinking, the men. But Pari disappointed her, “I was not nearly

enough. I was no balm to your pain, only another dead end, another burden, and you must have seen that early on (221).” Once, Pari has been abandoned by her father to save the family, and now Pari did the same with her foster mother to save herself. She has realized that her life will go nowhere with her mother. Even Neela, has done the same with her husband Suleiman now it’s her turn to be punished. After interview Nila commits suicide and Pari thinks, “This is Mama’s retribution. Not only for Julien, but also for the disappointment that Pari has always been (220).”

Chapter eight opens with Thalia’s message to Markos. Markos is a plastic surgeon and providing his services in Kabul as a volunteer. He is living in Wahdati’s house. He remembers how long before Thalia, with her mother Madeline was come to meet them at Tinos. His mother Odelia and Madeline were childhood friend. Madeline’s only wish was to be an actress and she married and divorced men who can help her in this. When Thalia was five years old a dog has eaten her half face. For Madeline it was very embarrassing to having a daughter who has a monstrous looks. She was helpless from visiting upon her daughter. One day she declared, “I’m going back to acting! In films! I’ve offered a role, the lead in a measure production” and she wants to leave Thalia with them for few weeks. She said that she would send for Thalia after she had shot her film. Markos thinks, about the real business of her visit, “But I now picture Madeline the way Mama must always have: Madeline, the cartographer, sitting down, calm, drawing the map of her future and neatly excluding her burdensome daughter from its borders. And she’d succeeded spectacularly, at least according to this obituary and its clipped account of a mannered life, a life rich with grace, achievements, respect (328).” She was come to get rid of Thalia, to cut her embarrassing finger to save her career. Thalia lived all her life with Markos’s mother. After schooling Markos left his mother and Thalia because he was afraid of being confined in Tinos. Markos knew his mother well, and himself too,

“...that I know precisely what she needs and yet how deliberately and unswervingly I have denied her, taking care to keep an ocean, a continent or preferably, both – between us for the better part of three decades(302)?”

Many years later Markos read about Madeline’s death in a newspaper and feel that he and Madeline did the same thing in their life, “A faint intimation that I have judged Madeline harshly, that we weren’t even that different, she and I. Hadn’t we both yearned for escape, re-invention, new identities? Hadn’t we each, in the end, un-moored ourselves by cutting loose the anchors that weighed us down (328)?” Markos and Madeline both had cut the finger to save hand. Odelia sacrificed her life for Markos and Thalia. And when time came Thalia took all the responsibility of Odelia.

The last chapter is about senior Pari (Abdullah’s sister) and junior Pari (Abdullah’s daughter). Actually Abdullah named his daughter after the name of his sister Pari. When Pari meets Pari, she realizes the strong bond they share with each other. All his life Abdullah missed his sister. And Pari his daughter sacrificed her life to fill this vacuum. She lived with solo aim, “I would make my father happy. There was nothing in the world I desired more than to be the one to take away his sadness (349). ” When her mother is diagnosed ovarian cancer she says to Pari, “Your father is like a child. Terrified of being abandoned. He would lose his way without you, Pari, and never find his way back. (376)” So she never thought about anything and anyone. A renowned art college offers her scholarship but she didn’t join while it was her dream. When Neal, whom she loved very much, proposed her she denied marrying. She admits, “I sabotaged things with him. Even when he promised to convert to Islam, to take Farsi classes, I found other faults, other excuses (389).” She avoids Hector who loves her. Though she knew her best years were draining away from her. She brutally keeps cutting the fingers to save hand. She did not

want to get feel her father ‘abandoned’. The novel ends with Abdullah and Pari, from where it started.

The novel is a collection of short stories each entwined with another, having one common incident of finger cutting and saving hands. Again and again, characters face a test of love. They sacrifice their dearest for a better life, or they remain loyal at the cost of their own happiness. In every case, someone’s getting damaged. All the characters faced the fabled *div* in their life. Some like Saboor, Nila, Parwana, Idris, Pari (Abdullah’s sister), Madeline and Markos cut the finger to save hand, other like Nabi, Masooma, Abdullah, Odelia, Thalia, and Pari (Abdullah’s daughter) sacrifice their hand to save finger.

Work cited

Khaled Hosseini. *And the Mountain Echoed*, New Delhi: Bloomsbury 2013.