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Individuals Trapped in the Labyrinth of Economy and Society: A Study of Khaled Hosseini's *And the Mountains Echoed*

Jasgeet Kaur

M.A. English

Lovely Professional University

And the Mountains Echoed is a tale revolving around characters and situations spanning generations and decades traversing from Shadbagh, an imaginary place in Afghanistan to Paris, Greece and finally the United States. Khaled Hosseini builds his novel that is divided into nine chapters told from perspectives of different characters, on the essential human relationships and how they flourish, nurture, endure and succumb amidst the culture they grow in. He communicates to millions of people the complex and complicated lives of the people of his origin country Afghanistan which was once as peaceful as it could never be now. In all his three novels the inner lives of characters are influenced by a vicious and intolerant external world, and the decisions they make about their own lives are influenced by things over which they have least control. This novel whose roots are set in Afghanistan cannot be read and understood in isolation with the society and economy of the country. The war in this novel is not just the external turmoil the country has been facing since the last fifty decades, but also the inner turmoil that affects the human relationships. According to a research *Cost of War* done by Afghanistan's non-governmental organizations:

The past three decades of war and disorder have had a devastating impact on the Afghan people. Millions have been killed, millions more have been forced to flee their homes and the country's infrastructure and forests have all but been destroyed. The social fabric of the country is fractured and state institutions are fragile and weak. (3)

The socio-economic factors of the country set the trap for its people to fall into. In the unendurable climate with its harsh winters bringing its toil upon the poor and large families, some choices have to be made in order to breathe for a few more years. When the brutal cold takes away the life of Saboor's new born baby, he decides to give away Pari, his three year old daughter to the affluent Wahdati couple in Kabul in order to secure himself a job and to lessen the number of mouths to be fed- "*a finger cut, to save the hand.*" (Hosseini 33) Poverty leads him to sell his child, his only daughter. The opaque future is given the hope that certain new and better things will happen. This incident sets in motion the series of events in the novel. One act of selling a daughter effects all the relationships. As Hosseini said in an interview, "In Afghanistan, you don't understand yourself solely as an individual. You understand yourself as a son, a brother, a cousin to somebody, an uncle to somebody. You are part of something bigger than yourself." Hosseini's works have been generally classified as having the universal themes of familial relationships, the setting in particular being Afghanistan. He traces the history of Afghanistan and its present situation, the horrifying effects of the war on the people and their

lives. He also talks about the lives of those who as a result of the war and political instability have to seek asylum in other countries, their sense of being away from their homeland and their experience with the world which is not their own.

And the Mountains Echoed describes the rich culture and traditions of this war-torn country in the process of destruction. It is not the individual choices, but choices made collectively to save a number of lives that affect the present and shape the future of the lives of characters in the novel. The characters are victims of troubling times. Hosseini represents the ways of life and struggle of Afghan people under adverse circumstances. The incidents of Saboor's giving away of Pari so that he could give his family an easy life; Parwana's leaving Masooma alone in the desert to die so that she could have the life she has always wanted to live; Nabi's having spur the main action in the novel (suggesting Saboor to give away Pari) in order to give happiness to a childless woman are all examples of how humans are led to take decisions that would later bring the most undesirable consequences. Adel's Baba taking away somebody else's land and doing the business of manufacturing opium in the name of modernizing Shadbagh depicts that the country is still in a war that is supported by its own people (Afghanistan is the world's largest illicit opium producer). Suleiman Wahdati loves his chauffeur Nabi but lives a loveless life because of his adherence to the strict Afghan moral code. Nila Wahdati moves with her adopted daughter Pari to Paris because she thinks Afghanistan is not the place to confirm her modern and passionate ideas. Timur and Idris depict the life of Afghan expatriates and how they face the troubling situations when they come back to Afghanistan. Such actions which have their consequences echoing throughout the novel are justified by Nabi when he says, "I suspect the truth is that we are waiting, all of us, against insurmountable odds, for something extraordinary to happen to us" (Hosseini 104). Hosseini weaves an intimate thread between the inner lives of the characters and the external world that exerts pressure on these characters and their fate. The actions are based on the fact that the results will bring better times than the present.

The Afghan community has suffered greatly from the political and military unrests, the Soviet invasion and the severe droughts and harsh winters have added to the miseries and difficulties faced by the people. Afghanistan works more than just a simple milieu in this novel. The poor and undeveloping economy of the Afghanistan has led to many Afghans move abroad for a better and secure life. Many people fled the country during the Soviet invasion of Russia that began in 1979 and lasted till 1989. According to a research *The Cost of War* done by a collaborative effort of various Afghan organizations the social and instability caused in the country has been vast. It says

After decades of relative stability, the overthrow of Daoud Khan in 1978 and the subsequent invasion by Soviet forces in 1979 marked the beginning of a prolonged period of conflict. As mujahedeen resistance groups grew in strength, waging guerrilla warfare and drawing Soviet forces further into the conflict, the abuses committed by both sides intensified. In the years of conflict that followed, more than 870,000 Afghans were killed,

three million were maimed or wounded, a million were internally displaced and over five million were forced to flee the country. (3)

These facts prove the crumbled state of Afghanistan and its citizens. The folktale at the beginning of the novel told by Saboor to his children summarizes the situation of Afghan expatriates when the div says:

This is his life now, and you saw for yourself his happiness. He is provided here with the finest food and clothes, with friendship and affection. He receives tutoring in the arts and languages and in the sciences, and in the ways of wisdom and charity. He wants for nothing. Someday, when he is a man, he may choose to leave, and he shall be free to do so. (Hosseini 11)

This clearly demonstrates the situation of the Afghan people who leave their country in order to provide their generation with a future that is unthinkable and unattainable in Afghanistan. Once they are accustomed to those privileges and the immunity from war, it becomes hard for them to return to their native country with completely contradicting environment. Nila and her daughter Pari, Abdullah and his family, the Bashiri family migrate to countries like Paris and the United States because of the political turmoil in the country.

The Bashiri family migrates to United States in the 1980s. These years were the years when a large number of Afghan families migrated to other countries in a desire to have a safe, protected and better life. The instable economy, combined with the foreign invasions and the destruction caused because of that, has left the natives with no option but to relocate to other countries. After twenty three years, in 2003, the Bashiri cousins Idris and Timur return to their homeland in order to sell off the properties of their ancestors, the properties that had a high value now. The trammels of materialism and also the fact that life abroad has made them accustomed to a more appropriate life, makes these characters come back to earn profits out of the properties that belonged to their forefathers. They have been the lucky ones because “they weren’t [there] when the place was getting bombed to hell” (Hosseini 147). But when a small amount of peace returns to the country, they come back and behave like the “quintessential ugly Afghan-American” (Hosseini 147), helping the old people around by giving them bakhshish and pretending like they have been a part of all their suffering and pain.

The Bashiri brothers come across a girl named Roshana in Afghanistan who has suffered from an attack on her head by an ax as a result of a fight between her father and uncle over a property dispute. Her situation after the attack has made her appearance horrendous. Idris promises Amra Ademovic, Roshana’s nurse, to provide for the treatment of Roshana. When Idris and Timur return to Afghanistan they seldom remember the promises they made to people back in Afghanistan. Timur even has his name changed to “Tim” once he reaches America. Idris, after much delay, talks to his chief Joan Schaeffer about financing the treatment project of Roshana.

Disturbingly, his boss' denial of the noble cause due to insufficiency of funds brings a relief to Idris- "He gets up again, surprised that he is feeling lighter, almost relieved by his [boss'] response" (Hosseini 169). He justifies his action by making himself believe that it is his hard work that has given him all the luxuries and comforts of life and he need not feel guilty about not helping a poor girl. He ignores his responsibility he had promised to fulfill because of the fact that he immersed himself in his sumptuous American life and did not want it to get spoiled or even changed because of a promise he made back in Afghanistan. Even when given a solution by his wife Nahil that he could help bring a change by donating to the causes in Afghanistan, he doesn't pay heed to her. He becomes one of those American and European people who considered Roshana as an animal, got amused by her and at the end left her on her own survival.

In another chapter the drug business is described in the novel amidst the changing scenario of Afghanistan, from the 50s to the present century, indicating that even the nature of war has shifted- from violent to non- violent but equally and even more destructive. The times have changed drastically in the novel, the small town of Shadbagh from where the novel begins has been transformed into Shadbagh-e-Nau (New Shadbagh). Adel's baba who is the pioneer of bringing this transformation in the village is the one responsible for the opium trade in the village. This business is handled by him, without the knowledge of his son and without the interference of his wife. Adel is unaware of this side business of opium manufacturing his father carries on. He justifies his bad deeds by doing good deeds because as he says, "it's important for the fortunate, for the people like us, to live up to their responsibilities" (Hosseini 246). He considers to balance his wrongdoings by improving the condition of Shadbagh and some of its people. It is only when Adel meets Gholam, a boy almost the same age as Adel that he realizes what actual good deeds his father is doing. The house Adel's family lived in which had nine bedrooms and seven bathrooms and all the luxuries one could dream of, was built on the land seized from Gholam's father Iqbal:

"This was my [Gholam] family's tree. This was my family's land. It's been ours for generations. Your father built his mansion on our land. While we were in Pakistan during the war." He pointed to the orchards. "These? They used to be people's homes. But your father had them bulldozed to the ground. Just like he brought down the house where my father was born, where he was raised". (Hosseini 267)

As Kabir, one of his father's bodyguard tells Adel "Your father is a river to his people" (Hosseini 249). He is a river that has and is continuing to drown all the people of Shadbagh-e-Nau. As opposed to the lower class people who indulge into this trade in order to retrench and pay the debts they have been pushed into, Adel's baba's motives seem nothing but lust and greed for money and power. The main reason for traders like him to enter this business of illicit drug manufacturing is the large profits earned from this business. Opium profits help the traders get a hold of the things that are beyond the reach of earning by honest means; for example buying huge lands by deceiving the ones who acquired and have possessed it for generations. Even

Adel's baba who is the savior and creator of Shadbagh-e-Nau and "had been handed an award for his humanitarian work" (Hosseini 243) seizes the rightful owners from their land and builds his own mansion in its place. It is a result of this opium trade that he is able to gain that enormity of respect and popularity because he is a major source of income to the village.

The power Adel's Baba has assumed has to be justified and this justification comes through relating his bad deeds as an act accomplished by the will of God. The wealth and luxuries he has accumulated, he says is a gift of God for all the sacrifices he has done in the name of Jihad- "God sees to it that those who sacrifice the most must justly reap the rewards as well" (Hosseini 242). Adel also comes to know how his mother Aria has accepted the situation in spite of knowing the fact that her husband is a drug lord. When asked by Adel if she regrets marrying his father she responds, "Look at our lives, Adel, she said slowly. Look around you" (Hosseini 253). She chooses to keep her son away from the true self of her husband- "He saw her struggles to keep from him all the things she knew, all the things she kept locked up, closed off, carefully guarded, like the two of them in this big house" (Hosseini 274). She seems to have accepted the luxury provided by the drug business her husband is into and chooses to live lavishly instead of questioning and going against her husband, even when she knows the impact of the drug business he is leading has on the people of the society.

The novel also describes the flow of income to Afghanistan from other countries, making it a dual economy and also emphasizing that Afghanistan will perish if America withdraws its share from the Afghan economy. The Afghan economy is heavily dependent on external support. The inflow of foreign capital is a major source that helps the poor people of Afghanistan to survive. Gholam reveals that his uncle Abdullah, his father's half-brother has been sending them money on a monthly basis- "I have an uncle in America, my father's half-brother, Uncle Abdullah. I've never met him. But he was sending us money every few months. It helped. It helped a lot" (Hosseini 258). The inflow of income from America has made Afghanistan a crumpled country surviving on the help of other countries.

The relationship between Nabi and Suleiman has been described by Hosseini, though in a very subtle manner that at a first glance it is difficult to assimilate their relationship, given the context of the country such as Afghanistan with a strict moral code that is deemed to be compulsory for its citizens to follow and adhere to. The Islamic law strictly condemns homosexuality and considers it as serious and heinous crime. The culprits can face death penalty. In this context, the relationship between Nabi and Suleiman has been shown in *And the Mountains Echoed* which develops, initially as a servant-chauffeur relationship and later develops into a stronger and undeniably a relationship where they both act as wife and husband. Nabi is recruited by Suleiman as a full-time worker. Being in close proximity to Suleiman, Nabi easily gets to know about the daily routine and habits of Suleiman but he is unable to make out for the reasons of his oddity. Nabi acts as a companion to Suleiman before his marriage- "He disliked walking alone, however, and thus [Nabi] was expected to accompany him" (Hosseini 76). Even after Suleiman

gets married, his behavior does not change. The inclusion of a wife in his life does not affect him. Nabi observes of their marriage: “Now, I knew from the start that the marriage was an unhappy one. Rarely did I see a tender look pass between the couple or hear an affectionate word uttered. They were two people occupying the same house whose paths rarely seemed to intersect at all” (Hosseini 82).

The relationship between Suleiman and Nila remains the same as it could have been had they not married. When they decide to adopt Pari, their parental selves are manifested in the best possible way. The Wahdati family “resembled a proper family” (Hosseini 103) as an effect of Pari’s entrance. Pari consumed most of their time and brought Nila and Suleiman together. In the spring of 1955, Suleiman suffers from an attack and it is then that Nila decides to leave her husband’s house with her daughter Pari to Paris. This incident throws all the responsibility and care-taking of the sick Suleiman on Nabi, who performs the duty very honestly. In Nila’s absence, Nabi acts as a companion to Suleiman. He takes care of his daily chores, cooks for him, takes him for the evening walks, and maintains his house but he is unaware of the fact that Suleiman loves him. He comes to know of this only when once he is cleaning Suleiman’s large closet and comes across his sketchbooks and finds the only subject portrayed in those to be himself. This is when he comes to know of the reason the relationship between Mr. Wahdati and Nila never developed. He remembers what Nila told him when she was leaving the house- “*It was you, Nabi. It was always you. Didn’t you know?*” (Hosseini 113). Nabi is astounded at this discovery but he decides to stay with Mr. Wahdati. He could not leave him in such a helpless state, sick and broken. In the later years Suleiman confesses to Nabi that he had been a “spectacularly bad cook” and a rash driver initially but he still hired him because of his own liking towards him. He tells him the reason- “Because you walked in, and I thought to myself that I had never seen anyone as beautiful” (Hosseini 119). He satisfies himself by just being in close proximity to Nabi because the strict moral code of Afghanistan could not have allowed him to openly confess his state.

The love that Mr. Wahdati has for Nabi remains inside the four walls of the house. The restrictions of the society does not let the relationship to evince and flourish. Though initially Nabi is utterly bewildered at this discovery but later on, they behave as husband and wife. Nabi discloses the existing relationship to Mr. Markos when he says, “In that time, we had developed between us an unspoken language born of familiarity and routine, and, inevitably, a degree of previously unthinkable informality had seeped into our relationship” (Hosseini 116). They come in close approximation to each other and “argued the way married couples do, stubbornly, heatedly, and over trivial things” (Hosseini 123). Terry Eagleton in the foreword to *Radical Tragedy* by Jonathan Dollimore says that: “No ideology in human history has been more persuasive and persistent than religion, a symbolic form which links the minutiae of everyday conduct to the most ultimate of spiritual realities, and it is hard to see that any ideology ever will be” (Eagleton xii). Religion acts as an impediment in not letting Suleiman accept his sexual orientation freely because of his fear of social ignominy. The politics of religion does not allow

this because of the unproductivity of homosexual relationships and their non-existence in the alleviation of the economic parameters of the country. The attitude of the society about the inefficaciousness of homosexuals makes them reject the idea of accepting it publically.

And the Mountains Echoed depicts how the forces of economy and society force an individual to bound himself and these shackles also lead a man to escape into self-made delusions and myths. The inability to break the commonly accepted beliefs and notions paralyzes a man and makes his life a living burden for himself. Many characters in the novel are trying to escape from these shackles, some are able to and others are left to believe that “this is life now” (Hosseini 23).

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