

Grief and Memory of Loss: A Study of Hosseini's *And the Mountains Echoed*

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Abstract: The paper studies the ways in which memories from childhood realize the past as a set of disruptive and wavering pictures in the novel, *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013) by Khaled Hosseini. The characters emotions and feelings are affected by the childhood memories that arouse simultaneous and conflicting reactions to their past. These characters who have been deprived of 'home' in childhood are not mere cultural exile in Paris and US, but rather suffer as inward exiles. The novel is read under the lens of J. Bowlby's 'Theory of Attachment' and Maslow's 'Hierarchy of Basic Needs'. This article will explore the family dynamics in the novel.

Keywords: Grief, memory, childhood, Khaled Hosseini.

Sec.1- Introduction: While Pari, Abdullah's daughter strives to erase her father's sadness, that was 'like a birthmark on his face' (348), Nila resorts to poetry writing to get rid of ever echoing childhood memories. In the novel, *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013) Khaled Hosseini effectively describes the themes of choice, silence and oppression through the use of main settings in Kabul, US and Paris in 1930's to the present times. The novel is the multi-layered narrative with multiple tales intertwined. Abdullah was born and raised in a poor family in a village in Afghanistan. Motherless Abdullah had little faith in his step-mother's love.:

If one night their house caught fire, Abdullah knew without doubt which child Parwana would grab rushing out... They weren't her children, he and Pari... They were another woman's leftovers. (22).

As Abdullah moves to US at an age of forty with his wife and child from Pakistan where he lived as a refugee from Afghanistan after Taliban attack, exile, migration and the longing for a sense of 'home' are omnipresent in his mind. In spite of all the struggles faced in youth and mature stages of life, the grief of coerced separation from his three years old sister Pari when he was just ten, is not faded. Later, Abdullah seeks the warmth of a safe childhood in his memories through fabricating stories to his daughter, Pari, whom he names after his lost sister. Most part of his story is narrated by his daughter. The story of Nila begins from the middle. The author uses flash-back technique and readers come to know about her life from her own perspective as well as of other characters related to her. Nila's relationships since her childhood are threatened by various kinds of conflicts that she is incapable of resolving at any stage of her life. The child narrator Abdullah cannot help noticing on his first visit at Wahdatis, Nila's 'thin waist, her small pretty mouth and perfectly arched brows, her pink toenails and matching lipstick' (38). Nabi introduces her as 'an accomplished poet' (41). Nabi, Mr. Suleiman

Wahdati's driver sums up his first observations of Nila as:

the beautiful, graceful creature... (who) smoked without hurry and with bewitching grace. The way her hand bent at its slender wrist reminded me of an illustration I had once seen in a glossy book of poems of a long-lashed woman with flowing dark hair lying with her lover in a garden, offering him a cup of wine with her pale delicate fingers. (80)

Sec.2- Purpose and Critical Source: The paper studies the ways in which memories from childhood realize the past as a set of disruptive and wavering pictures in the novel, *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013) by Khaled Hosseini. The characters emotions and feelings are affected by the childhood memories that arouse simultaneous and conflicting reactions to their past. These characters who have been deprived of 'home' in childhood are not mere cultural exile in Paris and US, but rather suffer as inward exiles. The novel is read under the lens of J. Bowlby's 'Theory of Attachment' and Maslow's 'Hierarchy of Basic Needs'. This article will explore the family dynamics in the novel.

Sec. 3.1 Bonds Broken: At the outset it would be worthwhile to search for the meaning of 'attachment'. Oxford Dictionary defines the term as 'affection, fondness, or sympathy for someone or something'. Abdullah is strongly attached to his sister, Pari in his most impressionable stage of life. Separation from the sister results in childhood traumatic grief that Abdullah tries to overcome through fabricating her stories before his daughter Pari, years later. In this way, though he remains stuck on the traumatic aspect of the separation but tries to proceed through the normal bereavement process. His daughter helps him maintain a lifelong, proper attachment to this lost sister through reminiscing and remembering. With an indifferent step-mom and brooding father at home his bond with his sister is the strongest. His emotional needs are fulfilled by providing little Pari all she demands and almost mothering her. However, one day his father gives up Pari to a rich family in Kabul for adoption, leaving Abdullah deserted at his own home.

Readers meet Abdullah as a child of ten, who is separated from his three years old sister, his entire world. Nila's parents split, when she is ten. Adult Nila has no childhood memories to cherish, even of the period when her parents stayed together. Her father 'was a part of the Pashtun aristocracy in Kabul.' (195). In an interview, forty four years old poet Nila, recalls him as a man 'with cold hands' (197), one who fondly nicknamed her 'fawn' and 'much later (she) saw how sinister (it) was... My father shot deer' (197). Her mother after divorce moves to her own country, France.

Childhood is remembered by Abdullah as well as Nila for its marking experiences, often fundamental ruptures. In order to understand the nature of these ruptures these shattering moments may be conceived as banishment from the safety of home, the universe of the child. These are then the memories tainted by an experience of exile, not merely physical to Paris and US respectively, but also mental one. Memories of childhood in the text are overshadowed by shattering past events that go

unrecognized and unacknowledged. As a result of the hurts imposed upon as a child, the adult individuals remember the past through physical signs of pain. Far from healing the injuries of the past, remembering childhood becomes an relentless conflicting rendezvous with past traumas. Though Abdullah and Nila belong to different economic classes and social strata, yet, the broken bonds result in similar grief and loneliness.

Sec.3.2 Theory of Attachment: Bowlby tells about attachment and its relationship to the emotional health of an individual. In his research, John Bowlby re-conceptualized mother-infant bond as a secure base relationship. He found that for healthy development "the infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate and continuous relationship with his mother (or permanent mother-substitute) in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment." (Bowlby:1951,179). Bowlby, a British psychoanalyst, considered attachment to be an ongoing process. Mental representations influence perception, expectations, availability and selection of behaviour. In 1950, Mary Ainsworth joined Bowlby in his research. She emphasized that parents provide 'a secure base' from which a child explores the world around him. These behaviourists firmly believed that representations of early attachment experience serve as a model for later secure base relationships as marriage, parenting and looking after aged parents. Bowlby believed:

During adolescence a child's attachment to his parents changes. Other adults may come to assume an importance equal to or greater than that of the parents, and sexual attraction to agemates begins to extend the picture... At one extreme are adolescents who cut themselves off from parents; at the other are those who remain intensely attached and are unwilling to direct their attachment behaviour to others; between the extremes lie the great majority of adolescents whose attachments to parents persists but whose ties to others are of much importance also. For most individuals the bonds to parents continues into adult life and affects behaviour in countless ways. (Bowlby:1969,174).

Maternal unavailability and over- dominating attitude of her father fails to provide Nila, conducive and supportive atmosphere, much needed for her emotional health. This affects all sorts of her later relationships including the romantic ones. Attachments in a family life generate bonds that can offer concern and security across the life cycle (Ainsworth, 1991), and can induce emotions like joy in togetherness or sorrow in separation (Bowlby,1979). In absence of an attachment figure, child Abdullah and Nila never get the assurance that they can explore the world, while the parents would provide protection when needed. Bowlby calls this assurance as 'secure base'. Nila has no one with whom she may seek proximity and who is perceived as more able to cope with the situation. For Abdullah, Pari is an anchor. Attachment figure serves as a secure base throughout life (Ainsworth, 1991).

Bowlby believes that such assured children take more responsibility for managing the attachment relationship as they grow older. After few years of marriage childless Nila, in an impulse adopts daughter, Pari,

Abdullah's sister, but she fails to develop new attachment relationship with the child. Even after losing Pari to a rich family, Abdullah feels 'secure base' and is capable of nurturing a family. He names his daughter after his sister. As a responsible man, Abdullah provides for his family and gives daughter a positive approach to life by being genuinely attached to her. On the other hand, Nila's attention seeking behaviour takes a toll on Pari as she grows into a young woman. Each time when aged Nila throws tantrums in inebriated state, Pari cares for her. This demonstrates that the understanding that there is someone who cares for and loves you, is vital in making of a safe base at any age and in any circumstances.

Abdullah is a bereaved child who has suffered mother's death at the age of seven. He now takes on adult responsibilities and worries about surviving family member, Pari, his sister, as he knows that it is only she who would care for him if something happens to their caregiver, father. Abdullah and Pari, both "find satisfaction and enjoyment." (Bowlby) in this bond of love. Abdullah finds satisfaction in sacrifices he makes for Pari. Once he trades his only pair of shoes for a peacock feather to be gifted to his sister and returns home with split and bleeding heels. "Thorns and splinters had burrowed into the skin of his soles. Every step sent barbs of pain shooting through his feet." (20). Abdullah craves for mother's love. 'He ached for her all over again, for her gentleness, her inborn happiness, her bewilderment at people's cruelty.' (23). He also realizes, 'Pari was the only person in the world who would never, could never, hurt him. Some days, Abdullah felt she was the only true family he had.' (24).

Sec.3.3 Seeking Refuge in Poetry: Nila is talked about by society as the one "ridden all over town" like Mr. Wahdati's car' (81). She wears the dresses disapproved by Afghani society, enters into relations with many boys in her teens and all this she does to annoy her much reputed father. Due to anxiety, Nila responds to the dramatic separation of her parents and then her own separation from her mother in the form of protest. Protest is one of the phases of the effects of this kind of separation. Nila confesses:

And then I took to falling in love... Foolhardy wayward passions... I arranged clandestine rendezvous... I wrote a great deal at that time, long scandalous poems dripping with adolescent passion. (209).

In her youth she is brought to India for medical treatment where her womb is removed. She expresses this loss as "It's gone. They scooped it all out of me in India. I'm hollow inside." (94). Unavailability of mother as an attachment figure leads Nila to look up to her father as one but after this operation he also becomes the source of danger along with being the person she would naturally turn to for protection. This arouses conflict in her. Nila's father never attempts to figure out what was wrong with her, never talks with her regarding her life and growing up. His attitude enrages her. Bowlby and Ainsworth believed that child should be allowed to explore the world and conclude her own identity. However, Nila is

denied any freedom or choice by her father who continually pushes her to conform to his views. Nila in her teens faces identity confusion. This turns her into a rebel. At Saboor's home, Mrs. Nila is overwhelmed to find a family so poor but so intact. Her craving for child is most intense at this moment.

Saboor's family and children attract her and she adopts Pari, Saboor's three years old child. Depressed after her operation in India where Nila feels having 'left something vital of (my)self' (214) she consents to her marriage with Suleiman. Her husband seems to her, 'a brooding old man trapped in a younger man's body' (89), though later she realizes that he is of different sexual orientation and the marriage took place due to societal pressure. This adds to her grief and mourning resulting into despair. Nila throws frequent parties at her residence with her reluctant husband in the background. Nila entertains her guests with wine and her poetry on physical love, the ambience is almost intoxicating. Nabi describes, "She wrote about pleasure. I had never heard language such as this spoken by a woman" (98). Nila's clandestine relations run in parallel to her domestic life. "I smelled on her, underneath her own familiar perfume, a second scent...an aroma I recognized from having breathed it at the party two nights before. (99).

At this stage, Suleiman Wahdati is paralyzed, Nila feels no attachment or responsibility towards him. She chooses to leave him for her free life in France. Her attitude to life comes in denial or detachment mode that she opts as her defence mechanism. Nila's poetry considered in Afghanistan as an act of debauchery and by her father as 'the ramblings of a whore' (211) gain recognition in Paris. To her interviewer just few days before her suicide, Nila admits: "I did it not for the sake of some high and lofty notion about art but because I had no choice...If I did not surrender to it, I would have lost my mind" (210). Her poetry releases her off the pressure she lives in, in the suffocating conservative society of Afghanistan.

Sec.3.4 Incapability in Bonding: In Maslow's terms, Nila's physiological needs are met with, but her insecurity and lack of belongingness never let her achieve self-esteem. She is always ridden with psychological stressors like fear and anxiety and urge of being loved. Absence of attachment figure, in terms of Bowlby, always give her a sense of doubt about being loved. Since her psychological growth is blocked at this level, the final stage of self-actualization in the hierarchy is unachievable for her. Not that Nila is without genuine love or sympathy. Before deserting her paralyzed husband, Suleiman, caretaker Nabi finds 'Nila sobbing into his belly' (108), but the next moment she gets detached and pulls her car to leave for Paris. Similarly in Paris, Nila never hesitates leaving Pari unattended for her lovers. On one of the occasions, she leaves a note for ten years old child, "*I've gone to Alsace with Marc...Back in couple of days. Be a good girl.* Pari stood shaking in kitchen, eyes filling up" (178). Insensitive parenting by her father does not allow Nila to have her own emotional life and never ensures emotional warmth

and a sense of security. This results in Nila's failure to form any comfortable dyadic relationship in future. Gradually even Pari comes to realize, 'Men always failed Maman in the end. They forever fell disastrously short of whatever ideal she held them up to'(192).

Unable to maintain feelings of self-esteem when rejected by her lover, the economics professor, Julien, and with Pari entering into relation with the same man, leads Nila to regression. She turns neurotic, incongruent and defensive as seen in her last interview with Boustouler for *Parallaxe*. Nila finally commits suicide at the age of forty four. Being rejected by her mother, father, husband and finally daughter leads to negative feelings like anxiety, depression, grief, jealousy and loneliness in Nila. Abdullah has childhood memories to cherish, but Nila has none.

Sec.3.5 Seeking Refuge in Story-Telling While Nila seeks refuge in writing love poems, Abdullah finds release in telling stories of his sister to his daughter. Maslow in "A Theory of Human Motivation" classified human needs into two categories: deficiency needs and growth needs. Abdullah suffers from poverty as well as security issues, but has a family in childhood. In his youth he with his parents and step brother seeks shelter in Pakistan after Taliban attacks. As his physiological needs are met with and love of lost sister serves as secure base he does not lose faith in life. Abdullah's mind grabs hold of the memory of separation from Pari and pushes it underground, into some inaccessible corner of the unconscious. The memory, however rises up and emerges into consciousness on birth of his daughter. Abdullah's stories catch emotional events, assist him achieve control over the events, ease emotional tension and make meaning out of experiences. After losing his sister in childhood, Abdullah holds his daughter so tightly that he would not let her leave for higher studies to Baltimore. His daughter realizes: 'If what had been done to her was like a wave that had crashed far from shore, then it was the backwash of that wave now pooling around my ankles, then receding from my feet.'(367).

When Pari, his sister meets Abdullah, now a patient of Alzheimer's, after fifty eight years, she tries to stir his memories and asks how he named his daughter. Abdullah 'begins to hum under his breath, a rhythmic muttering he always resorts to when he is marauded by anxiety...and he is bowled over by a gush of disconnected thoughts, waiting desperately for the murkiness to clear.'(371). This song is the same that their mother used to sing to them. Abdullah is apt in story making along with story - telling. As his memories fade due to his disease he crafts his own stories regarding his wife and past life. 'He feels compelled to fill with bogus details and fabricated character traits, as though false memories are better than none at all.'(370). Abdullah never expresses his grief, remains depressed and anxious. He would not let his young daughter join college in other city for the fear of loss and gradually towards old age develops Alzheimer's disease. Abdullah meets with his fate on account of incomplete mourning process after traumatic separation from his most loved one. He never has courage to face the reality in a clear light.

Sec.4 Conclusion: Lives of Abdullah and Nila that may seem different superficially find commonalities in their struggles for survival as victims of deprivation, lovelessness, abuse and violence that gives the impression of a hopeless destiny. Thus, the desire to remember the past of childhood in the novel tends to be conflicting and often unwillingly caused by an unrelated incident. The memories that float up are therefore the reverse of a wistful longing of a time before the rupture. These rather focus on the irretrievable agonizing breaks rooted in childhood experiences. Remembering childhood in the novel is the remembering of an absence, of loss, of aching feelings that were undergone in silence, never conveyed. Bowlby and Maslow both emphasized on the basic psychological need to 'belong to' in humans. Both also believed in the sense of belonging to be an ongoing process requiring long lasting reciprocal relations. Gratification of this need leads to positive social, behavioural and psychological outcomes.

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