

## Traumatic Familial Relationships in Khalid Hossaini's *And the Mountains Echoed*

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### ABSTRACT

Khalid Hosseini is one of the most acclaimed writers internationally for his sensitive portrayal of characters caught in the trauma of war and the complexities of familial relationships. He was born in Kabul in 1965 and has lived in the US as his family was forced to find shelter there after the situation deteriorated in his own country. His first novel *The Kite Runner* was an instant success and it established him among the most popular literary writers around the globe. Whereas in *The Kite Runner* Hosseini portrayed the father-son relationship most touchingly, in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, he explored other familial relationships-husband and wife, mother and son and also the bonding of women. In *And the Mountains Echoed* Hosseini goes a step further and gives us various familial relationships -from various sets of siblings to parents and children. Throughout the novel, the characters are constantly grappling with the complexities and challenges of family dynamics, including issues of loyalty, love and betrayal. This paper is an attempt to analyse the impact of trauma in various ways on people tied to familial bonds.

**Keywords:** *Familial, Siblings, Love, Trauma.*

Trauma is described as an emotional state which results from long-lasting mental or emotional damage. It is also described as an emotional response to a terrible event by American Psychological Association. Traumatic behaviour or trauma can be a result of natural disaster, war, violence, acute physical or mental torture or shocking events over which one has no control or hold. "According to the traditional trauma model pioneered by Cathy Caruth, Trauma is viewed as an event that fragments consciousness and prevents direct linguistic representation. The model draws attention to the severity of suffering by suggesting that the traumatic experience irrevocably damages the psyche." (Rothberg)

At the centre of Hossaini's novel is the pair of Abdul and Pari who are not only siblings but soulmates. After the death of their mother, during Pari's birth, it is Abdul who raises her and comforts her till the age of six. When Pari is adopted by Wahdatis, Abdul is heartbroken and scarred for life. He carries the guilt and trauma of Pari's separation till his last breath and names his daughter Pari. He is not able to forget his sister and keeps the box of feathers, that his sister used to collect, in the hope that he will be able to give it to her one day. According to Balaev "one of the main tenets of modern literary trauma theory is that trauma produces a fear which

splits or obliterates identity.... [and] intergenerational transmission of trauma shapes identity.” (149-50) The separation from Pari not only affects the life of Abdullah but also his daughter Pari as she always feels the invisible presence of her aunt and dreams about her.

Pari, on the other hand, after the initial trauma of separation forgets her previous family but she is haunted by the trauma of some unknown loss that she cannot define. Her dramatic relationship with her adoptive mother adds another dimension to the story. Nila, Pari’s adoptive mother is traumatised by her own past – an autocratic father, the separation from her mother, an abortion resulting in the removal of the uterus, and her old, paralysed husband. The mother-daughter conflict in the story highlights the significance of the past and one’s origin and background in the formation of the future. Pari, not knowing her origin, continuously compares herself to her beautiful mother whose seemingly callous behaviour makes her rebel in more ways than one. The conflict between them ends with the tragic suicide of Nila, leaving many unresolved questions.

Another pair of siblings in the story is Parwana and her beautiful sister Masooma who is engaged to Saboor, Pari’s father. Parwana, throughout her life, has to listen to the praises of Masooma who is not only more beautiful but also more accomplished and sanguine in temperament. For the opposite sex also, it is Masooma’s Personality that acts as a magnet. Her engagement to Saboor is the last straw for Parwana who likes him and is hoping to marry him. In a moment of jealous rage, she becomes the cause of her sister’s fall from the tree and Masooma’s resulting disability: Hart in his essay talks about violence which can be the consequence of “an attempt of eliminating the other, whether it is deliberate or the result of ignorance, ideological blindness or hatred” (13)

The relationship between Parwana and Masooma is not only complex but has been jinxed since birth. Both are twins but whereas Masooma was expected and welcomed into the world with cheers“ Parwana was a surprise“ the midwife had to free her from the cord that had wrapped itself around Parwana’s neck “ (6) While Masooma was considered “the angel“ by the whole village, Parwana was “a tyrant“ (61), ignored and unappreciated. When Masooma flowered into a beauty, she drew the attention of everyone including boys. She seemed to have everything – personality, charm accomplishments and a bright prospect for marriage to the man of her own choice. On the other hand, “all her life Parwana had made sure to avoid standing in front of a mirror with her sister. It robbed her of hope to see her face beside Masooma, to see

so plainly what she had been denied. But in public, every stranger's eye was a mirror. There was no escape. (72)

The fall caused by the momentary fury of Parwana is the consequence of deeply entrenched jealousy and her despair over Saboor's imminent proposal to Masooma instead of herself the incident completely changes the equation between them as Masooma in that one moment loses everything including her freedom and after that is completely dependent on Parwana. On the other hand, Parwana has to bear the consequences of her action by looking after Masooma as best as she can while harbouring that secret guilt of being the cause of such a vile act of revenge. Masooma's final request of being left in the desert to die liberates Parwana of her sister's responsibility but adds to her trauma of participating in another sin and carrying that secret to her grave. "No one has to know no one would. It would be her secret; one she would share with the mountains only. (80)

Another traumatic relationship exists between Pari's adoptive mother Nila Wahdati and her father. Talking about her life, Nila, a poetess tells an interviewer that "we had become natural opponents" (245) Nila's defiance against her father is caused by his autocratic behaviour and the absence of her mother. The volatile relationship further deteriorates with Neela's secret trip to India with her Father apparently to have an abortion and hysterectomy. This is followed by her marriage to Suleman Wahdati, a much older man who is in love with his driver, Nabi, Pari's uncle. The complex situation is resolved somewhat when Nila migrates to Paris, her mother's city of birth, with Pari. But her trauma continues as she flits from one lover to another in search of security and true love and becomes an alcoholic. Her affairs and drinking are an attempt to forget her turbulent past and her troubled present as she cannot come to love her adopted daughter Pari and finds it impossible to appreciate her differences. Pari, on the other hand, wants her mother's validation but rebels when she finds it missing. She starts living with her mother's lover Julien and has an affair with him. When Nila is asked about Pari by the interviewer, she replies "I have come to believe she is my punishment" (246), hence summing up the nature of their relationship adequately.

Throughout her life, Pari tries to join the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle that her life had become. She does not remember the past, but shadows remain and the memory of a haunting presence." What Pari had always wanted from her mother was the glue to bond together her loose, disjointed scraps of memory, to turn them into some sort of cohesive narrative. But Maman never said much." (249) Pari's ignorance of her past increases the complexities in her

relationship with her mother and Nila's suicide leaves many questions unanswered. It also brings home the waste of a beautiful life, the trauma of a troubled childhood and a wasted youth culminating in a miserable end. By recounting Nila's relationship with her father, Hossaini also highlights The subjugation of women in a patriarchal society. As a female, Neela's choice does not matter and is not considered. She challenges her father's authority constantly, bearing all the punishments meted out to her. She tells her father that "she had no desire to slip the leash around ...(her) own neck." (240)

The novel moves around these beautifully sketched characters and their complicated lives while other new characters are introduced. But in the centre remains Pari and the memory of her soulmate, her brother Abdullah whose memory is buried deep in the recesses of her disjointed past.

Another interesting relationship is introduced towards the latter half of the novel, between an American surgeon Markos and his mother. Marcos comes to Kabul to help rebuild it and stays in Wahdati's house at Nabi's invitation. He makes Kabul his second home, neglecting his mother and leaving her care to Thalia, the daughter of her mother's friend. The complicated relationship between him and his mother arises from the strict demeanour of his disciplinarian mother which never lets him be free with her. He respects and looks up to her more as a teacher and seeks her approval like an obedient student. Thalia, with her half-eaten face, comes to visit them with her mother but never returns. His humanitarian mother takes Thalia under her wing and when she's abandoned by her own mother on the pretext of shooting for a film. Thalia, who is starving for love and companionship, becomes a permanent member of their household.

For Markos, the lesson of humanity starts at home when he has to get used to the presence of Thalia and look at her without flinching. His mother makes sure that Thalia can continue with her life without any restrictions. Markos' subsequent working in Kabul and remaining there for many years is not only an affirmation of the values imparted by his mother but also an attempt to create a separate identity for himself. Throughout his life, he struggles to come out of the shadow of his imposing mother. Markos feels as if he has let her down by his actions. Whenever he talks to her on phone, he feels" weakly reprimanded and what's more deserving of it, guilty of wrongs unspoken, offences I have never been formally charged with "(324)and compared to Thalia he finds himself less of a hero in his mother's eyes. As Markos comes to accept Thalia as a family member, she introduces him to a camera and taps into his passion for photography. She is also the reason for him being a surgeon as he wants to "rectify with

each slice of my scalpel and arbitrary injustice, to make a small stand against a world order. I found it disgraceful, in vain in which a dog bite could rob a little girl of a future, make her an outcast, an object of scorn. (378)

Markos's visit to his old mother after many years makes him realise not only her frailty but also her mortality as a human being. He is startled by the signs of ageing and sickness "I cannot reconcile these things with my mother. I resist them. They looked to me like the belongings of a stranger. Someone indolent, harmless. Someone with whom you could never be angry". (385) He also realises that it was Thalia who had been "a true sister ...all along. " (385) The final validation comes when his mother tells him that "You have turned out good. You've made me proud, Markos." (392) it is then he realises that throughout his life he was waiting to hear something like this. "I feel her words landing deep within me." (392) and they stay, giving him warmth and a new perspective on relationships with the people most dear to him. "All those years, I had been blind to a greater truth, which lay unacknowledged and unappreciated, buried deep beneath my grievances. It was this: that my mother would never leave me. This was her gift to me. (393)

For Hosseini's characters familial relationships are full of complex emotions and ups and downs. Some find their way to realisation and understanding like Markos, some others like Nila are doomed. And for some like Pari, destiny provides most of the pieces of the puzzle, but she cannot fit them together as the prime figure of her life, her brother Abdullah, is not able to recognise her due to his memory loss. The box of feathers which Abdullah kept for her symbolises the true spirit of their innocent love and Abdullah's sacrifice for his little sister. But sadly, he cannot recall the memories attached to it and the relevance it has in their life. Both when they meet are the victims of time and its consequences. The tragic relationship is only saved by the presence of Abdullah's daughter Pari, who not only unites them but also replaces his presence in her aunt's life.

Interestingly in the background of the novel, we see a systematic destruction of Afghani culture by various factions and the country's political situation becoming more and more complex. Love, generosity, sacrifice, and war all play their role silently as the plot unfolds. Through its poignant and powerful depiction of complex and sometimes traumatic familial relationships the novel highlights the challenges and joys of being part of a family and enduring bonds that tie us to those we love, even amidst war, violence and hatred.

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