

AND THE MOUNTAINS ECHOED

Title: *And the Mountains Echoed*

Author: Khaled Hosseini

Genre: Generational drama/ historical novel

Pages: 444

Notes

Background

Set in Afghanistan, the novel takes place over several generations, beginning in the fall of 1952, takes us several years into the past, and ends more than half a decade later in 2010. Hauntingly, the moral dilemmas that characters face over the 58 years that the central characters, Abdullah and Pari, are apart, bear an uncanny resemblance to each other, highlighted by the substance the opening myth, which permeates each tale and brings out the resonance that each choice creates in each generation.

Author:

Khaled Hossini is mostly known for his bestselling, vivid depictions on Afghanistan, the country in which he was born. Of these, his bestselling works include the biting satire *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the sweep of Afghan history *And the Mountains Echoed*, and his bestselling tale of siblings separated by hardship and tragedy. He grew up in Kabul, a modernized city in the heart of an impoverished country, and moved to Paris in 1976. When the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan rendered his family's return home impossible, they moved to California.

There are haunting similarities in Hosseini's works: the formula of separated siblings; the radical shifts of political and social climate in the background of the main events, its presence never imposing but constantly felt; and the devastating impact of war and terror.

Kabul:

It is not the first time that the city of Kabul has appeared in Hosseini's novels. Even in previous novels, notably *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, it has served as a symbol of modernization and wealth in a sea of poverty. Nila Wahdati's showiness and falseness in her speech demonstrating her desire to become one of 'the common people' is highlighted by the innocence and simplicity of Abdullah's observations, transforming it into something striking. However, she makes a startlingly insightful statement in the quote:

Kabul is an island, really. Some say it's progressive, and that may be true. It's true enough, I suppose, but it's also out of touch with the rest of this country.

What Nila says, for all the falseness of her admiration of the 'sturdiness', 'hospitality', 'humility', 'resilience', 'dignity' of the poor, makes sense in this context. Kabul is a world of wealth, miles away from the mud cottage and sooty walls of Abdullah's home in Shadbagh. It is an ironic and biting critique of the wealth disparity in Afghanistan.

And yet Hosseini also allows the reader to pause and consider the value system that are represented by these two separated, isolated worlds: one values materialism, and the other family bonds and home. When Pari is adopted by the Wahdatis, the reader is encouraged to wonder: can the education and luxury provided to her replace the bonds of family, especially the unusually strong bond between her and her brother? Considering what comes after – the Afghan Wars, the massacres, the killings – it seems as if Pari is truly ‘better off’ living this luxurious life. However, Hosseini casts doubt on the reader’s mind: both Nila and Nabi, the two people who have made the decision to tear Pari away from her family and her brother, are overcome with guilt when they carry out this act. Nila insists that her actions are for the best but convinces no one, and deep down she acknowledges that she just wants a child of her own. Nabi admits that he has done so to gain the favor of Nila Wahdati, whom he is infatuated with, and later feels the repercussions for.

Afghanistan and the International World:

Aside from the discussion of loss, betrayal, familial love and redemption, Hosseini is also intensely interested in the relationship of Afghanistan to the wider world. After remaining within the scope of Afghanistan for four chapters, Hosseini breaks the reader out of the comfort zone to create a biting satire demonstrating the traumas done to those who remain as well as the moral decadence of those who leave and then come back to rediscover their country. Notable destinations are Paris, the Greek island of Tinos and the United States.

Nila Wahdati and Pari, in France

Markos and Thalia, on Tinos

Idris and Timur, from the United States, returned to Afghanistan

Through which Hosseini introduces themes of distance, international politics and foreign wealth.

Abdullah and his daughter, Pari (II), immigrated to San Francisco

The Afghan Wars:

Nabi provides a brief but striking picture of the backdrop of the entire novel, events that have only ever lingered in the background but are responsible for several ruptures in the book.

What shall I tell you, Mr. Markos, of the years that ensued?... I can sum it up in one word: war. Or rather, wars.

Not one, not two, but many wars, both big and small, just and unjust, wars with shifting casts of supposed heroes and villains, each new hero making one increasingly nostalgic for the old villain. The names changed, as did the faces, and I spit on them equally for all the petty feuds, the snipers, the land mines, bombing raids, the rockets, the looting and raping and killing. Ah, enough!

The Discussion of Poverty:

Within this generational drama, Hosseini maximizes the use of echo chambers to his advantage to demonstrate how the cycle of poverty and misery resonates through the generations, and to show how no one can truly break the cycle of poverty. What may have seemed like cheesy melodrama in the

hands of other authors has been spun into a deeply intimate and gripping network of multi-layered tales that mirror each other.

Pope Francis has said, 'The poor have become part of the landscape.' And it is true. The poor will always be with us.

'We deprive them of the right to dream of their mothers.'

The Narration

The novel is divided into nine chapters, each written from a different perspective. With this formula: creating an extraordinary interconnection between characters, foreshadowing other characters with a brief word from another, Hosseini's technique is not merely world-building; he has created a multi-layered, elemental narrative chemistry, permeated by a myth that is narrated by a nameless narrator at the beginning.

Chapter 1: Saboor, the fairytale of the *div*

Chapter 2: Abdullah, the loss of Pari

Chapter 3: Parwana, who carries a sibling sorrow of her own

Chapter 4: Nabi, the lightning rod of sympathy despite his role in separating the siblings

Chapter 5: Idris, a scathing, ironic satire that critiques the US's role in the Afghanistan wars

Chapter 6: Pari, her life in Paris under the influence of an alcoholic, suicidal mother who treats Pari as a disappointment

Chapter 7: Adel, who learns of his father's crimes and comes to accept them, sacrificing his morality for a life of luxury

Chapter 8: Markos, a doctor who volunteers his medical services in Afghanistan but abandons his own lonely mother at home

Chapter 9: Abdullah's daughter, Pari

The Opening Myth

A finger cut, to save the hand.

At first glance, the fairytale of Baba Ayub's heroic sacrifices most closely mirrors the approaching, impossible choice that his narrator has to make.

At first glance, the heroic father in the tale that Saboor tells his children most closely mirrors what he himself is about to do: cut off a finger to save the hand. As Baba Ayub sacrificed his favorite son to save the rest of his children, Saboor gave away his daughter to gift her with a better life away from the harsh, impoverished world of the peasant. This storytelling prepares both his children and the reader for the coming rupture of their family, one choice that will resonate through the generations.

The truth is, the tale that Saboor relays to his children as they embark on a journey across a desert, through the mountains after which the novel is named, is not limited to a father drawn into a terrible pact. It is a substance that permeates the network of tales that Hosseini skillfully constructs, its meaning taking on new meanings, developing and diversifying into various layers.

Hosseini draws a contrast between one's own happiness and the happiness of other people. This choice is not just Baba Ayub's, or even just that of Saboor, his narrator – it is the choice of every thinking human being, the essence of every narrator in each of the successive stories in the book. Each character in the novel faces a moral dilemma that echoes that of Baba Ayub's. Each of them serve as a foil and contrast to the previous narrator, but soon transform into gripping destinations of their own.

Shifting Perspectives

Every narrator of his own story is introduced peripherally in this book. In this peripheral vision, the reader gains slight insight into the characters, but never enough to truly know him, only to provide an impression. Most of them are resoundingly negative: Parwana is introduced as a mother who offers true affection that she gives to her biological children but cannot muster genuine love for her stepchildren, Abdullah and Pari; Nabi is introduced as the crucial instrument that separates the children; Nila Wahdati callously removes Pari to France for a new life during Nabi's account of her. However, when given their chances to narrate, what the reader finds despicable about them transforms into something intriguing and at times, even striking. Parwana carries a sibling sorrow of her own after she permanently harms her sister out of jealousy; Nabi's unconditional and unrequited affection for an artificial woman and his unwavering loyalty to his employer, coupled by his moving trajectory into goodness, turns him into the book's lightning strike of sympathy; Nila Wahdati transforms into the novel's more compelling creations as she completes her character arc with suicide.

There are, of course, likeable narrators, but even then they turn out to have a darker side. Idris is first introduced as an introverted, culturally sophisticated doctor fiercely determined to help a girl in the hospital, a foil and contrast to his crass and ethnically dodgy cousin Timur. However, his attempts to give Roshni a better life end due to his own callousness and selfishness; it is Timur, who he resents because of his confidence, success and immense care he shows to the people and strangers around him, who proves effectual in helping Roshni. In contrast, the narrator of Chapter 8, Dr Markos Varvaris, is a character who starts out unlikeable but grows on the reader during his character trajectory. He at first judges his childhood friend Thalia for being mauled by a dog, repulsed by her

appearance and calling her a 'monster', but is later inspired by their friendship to become a plastic surgeon and travel to Afghanistan to help children in the war.

The shifting perspectives also allow the reader to take different glimpses of each character, from the point of view of different characters. Hosseini reminds us of the judgemental nature of human perspective in Idris's perception of his cousin Timur, who he judges as crass, ethically dodgy and showy in his helping the poor. However, Idris is forced to come to terms with his own selfishness and hypocrisy when he fails to fulfill his promise to Roshi, an Afghan girl whose circumstances left her with a head injury, while Timur is the one who gets things done and makes a difference. The most daunting example of the different sides of a person is the portrayal of Nila Wahdati. From the simplicity of Abdullah's childish observations, she is a greedy devil who steals his sister away from him; in the eyes of Nabi, she is the source of his infatuation yet devoted as a mother. In Chapter 6, we get to hear her own voice within the pages of a magazine interview: she considers herself a tragic, avant-garde poet and a devoted mother whose child is a disappointment to her. In Pari's eyes, however, she is an aging, alcoholic narcissist.

Human Relationships

This is not the first time that Hosseini has found himself immensely interested in human relationships: not least in *The Kite Runner*, which explores a dynamic between fathers and sons, and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, which is preoccupied with the love between mother and daughter. *And the Mountains Echoed* is no exception from Hosseini's recurring themes: this time, the story is told through the prism of sibling relationships, a theme refracted through the lives of several pairs of brothers and sisters.

However, although some relationships are enduring, like that of Abdullah and Pari, which last until their old age, others are fleeting and serve both as a mirror of Abdullah and Pari's predicament as well as a foil. Instead of revealing the radiance of love, others depict a grim reflection of Abdullah and Pari's story, weighing down the book with themes of betrayal and hypocrisy, guilt and gratitude.

Abdullah and Pari

Most central to the plot are the brother and sister Abdullah and Pari, who most prominently embody Hosseini's themes of pain, love and familial love. It is clear from the beginning that their bond is unusually powerful; with the loss of their mother, Abdullah assumes the role of Pari's guardian, and is utterly devoted to her, in ways that he cannot put into words.

Their separation impacts them differently. Abdullah, 10 years old and having cared for Pari almost all his life, is older and remains agonized over the loss of his sister for most of his life. When he marries, he names his daughter after his sister to commemorate his loss. Pari, younger, and blessed with material gifts of education and luxury, manages to forget her brother. However, as the book

progresses, Hosseini gives us an interesting case of role reversal: Abdullah suffers forgetfulness from Alzheimer's disease, while Pari learns from Markos that she has a brother and locates him in the United States.

Abdullah and Pari's lasting relationship, one that has been stretched and tested over the generations but finally brings them back together as old people, is the idealized form of familial bond. The others end in betrayal and grief – Parwana pushes her more beautiful, more beloved sister from the tree to claim the young man whose heart she won; Nabi is the instrumental force that separates Abdullah and Pari in a resounding betrayal against his own family; Adel and his mother would not turn from the violent, tyrannical cycle of misery that the father of their house runs.

Parwana and Marsooma

Nabi and Nila/ Suleiman

A love triangle is set up between these three central characters of Chapter 4, Nabi's narrative, but it is unlike any love triangle I have ever come across. Nabi's narration gives each character substance, enough that we would understand their personalities and their characters, but always with a mystical edge, such that the reader senses Nabi withholds some knowledge that he would not reveal just yet.

As the narrator, Nabi seems like the easiest character to identify: he is a young, handsome man, the success story of the village of Shadbagh, and the instrumental force that separates Pari and Abdullah. By the simplicity of Abdullah's account, Nabi is treated with a total lack of empathy and overall isolated from the scene, introduced only through the periphery of the scene. The reader, having witnessed the utter devotion and unconditional love that Abdullah feels for Pari, and bearing the knowledge that Nabi abandoned his home and his family to seek out a life of luxury, working for the people who are responsible for the predicament of the village, is likely to feel no sympathy for Nabi. Hosseini understands this, and having established the unlikeable nature of the character, twists the screw. Nabi's sentiment expressing his guilt is one that transforms his character into a lightning rod of sympathy: 'I took those two helpless children, in whom love of the simplest and purest kind had found expression, and I tore one from the other... All this time has passed, Mr. Markos, and it still weighs on me.' The reader is reminded not to judge these people too quickly, too harshly, something that every character, from the self-righteous doctor Idris to the plastic surgeon Markos to the son of a Taliban Commander eventually learn to do over the course of the novel.

The same idea applies to Nila, Suleiman's unwilling wife, Nabi's object of infatuation and a morally complicated yet tragic character. When she first enters the story, her character is also established through the simplicity of Abdullah's vision, and the reader naturally condemns her for tearing the siblings apart through her own magnanimity and selfish desire for a child. She never expresses any love for Suleiman and deems him arrogant and aloof. In Chapter 6, Pari's account makes it clear that Nila has begun to resent her daughter and deems her own life a failure; nor does her callous act of moving Pari to France and leaving her husband behind win her any points for favor. However, it is also crucial to recognize that Nila's importance in two respects. First, she is undeniably

a product of female Afghan literature, represents the clash between the traditional values of Afghanistan and the influx of modern, Western ideas of freedom, feminism and modernization. Her father, a hardline conservative, is averse to her acts of smoking or wearing revealing clothes; for this reason, Nila speaks of her father with despise and resentment, but the reader is given certain hints that her father does indeed love his daughter and wants what is best for her – for one, he stays with her for six weeks while she is ill until she is restored to health. It is almost impossible to grasp the true nature of Nila's character, given the nuance that pervades it and the multiple perspectives that give her conflicting characteristics: to Nabi, she is an object of beauty and desire; with Pari, she expresses disappointment and resentment. In the end, it is impossible to feel anything but pity for Nila, who has worked hard to rise through social barriers and become a poet. She is undeniably talented, but considers her life a failure in every way. She commits suicide, being unable to find any emotional ties to life, and puts an end to her unpredictable life.

The most mysterious of the three characters is Suleiman Wahdati, Nila's husband and Nabi's employer. Suleiman remains a mystical presence throughout the majority of Nabi's narration, appearing introverted and aloof. His distance and detachment from the world is at first hinted at in Nila's foreshadowing whisper: 'It was you', and explained by his final revelation to Nabi after years of repression and secrecy: Suleiman is a closeted homosexual and has fallen in love with Nabi, which he himself takes as a lifelong sentence to exile from society and subjects him to life as an outcast. Nabi continues to care for his aging, physically deteriorating employer not out of a life of luxury, but out of guilt that he allowed Nila to adopt Pari as well as his contentment in caring for Mr. Wahdati. This unconditional support is a far cry from Nila's own callousness and lack of care, as she takes Pari and flees from her physically fragile husband.

Nabi may be the instrumental force that creates the rupture in the family, but he is also the one who creates the force that draws them back together. At the end of his narration, he addresses the reader of his letter, Dr. Markos Varvaris, and asks him to make contact with Pari and inform her of her familial bonds that have already been lost to memory. All three characters – the loyal servant, the undeniably gifted but ultimately suicidal poet and the closeted homosexual – have started out unlikeable in their roles of separating Abdullah and Pari, but their story is the lightning rod of sympathy. Their lives also embody the unhappiness of the wealthy and raises the value of the lives of the poor. Abdullah and his half-brother, Iqbal, may lead impoverished lives, but they make up for their lack of material wealth with their attachment to their home soil and their intimate, unbreakable familial bonds. In Nabi's tale – Nabi, who has forsaken his impoverished village for the materialistic world of the rich – it is obvious who comes out on top: Nila and Suleiman Wahdati may be wealthier and live lives of relative security and comfort, but Nila is lacking in emotional capacity, while Suleiman is forced to suppress his own due to society's standards.

Idris and Roshi

With the story of Idris and his temporary, fleeting connection with the injured girl Roshana, Hosseini displays a biting irony that critiques the participation of America in the Afghan wars and the trauma it has. Idris is a self-righteous doctor who was born in Afghanistan and travelled to the United States in the wake of the Afghan wars and has returned to rediscover his homeland.

Roshi is a victim of the trauma imposed upon the people of Afghanistan; and most ironically, the trauma is mostly caused by Idris's own inaction. She is a symbol of social evil, proof of the abandonment and misery of children, but also of innocence and pure goodness. Her tragedy is yet another example of the pettiness of family rivalries: her uncle, jealous of his more favoured brother and desiring the property that he believes belongs to him but was passed to the younger brother, slaughters the entire family in front of Roshi with an axe and almost murders Roshi, too. The shocking nature of this murdering spree -- and the exposure of the appalling extent to which one would go to feed his greed for power and wealth -- renders the mutual resentment between Timur and Idris rather insignificant.

Idris's return to his homeland and his relationship with Roshi and her nurse, Amra, is testament to Afghanistan's growing importance to the international world; but the depreciation that the Afghans face, especially the trauma of ordinary people in that country, is proof that America and the Soviet Union have used Afghanistan as another battlefield on which they can exert their power and define their own interests. This is mostly prominently shown by the way Idris himself betrays Roshi and Amra in the end, distracted by the ease of his luxurious, comfortable lifestyle in the U.S.

When Idris first enters the story, the reader is more inclined to find him likeable. Idris is culturally sophisticated, rather quiet and shy, and introverted, especially when placed next to his foil and contrast of a cousin, Timur. Idris is portrayed as a doctor with due sense of righteousness: he is a sensitive doctor who is repulsed by his cousin's open display of Americanised attitudes and disgusted by the power that their money bestows on them. However, one would also do well to remember that we are understanding the plot of the story as filtered through his lens; and that his account is therefore biased. For one, when he gives his reasons on why he dislikes his cousin Timur:

Timur has embarrassed him. He has behaved like the quintessential ugly Afghan-American, Idris thinks.

Tearing through the war-torn city like he belongs here, backslapping locals with great bonhomie and calling them brother, sister, uncle, making a show of handing money to beggars... It is hypocritical, and distasteful.

And it astonishes Idris that no one seems to see through his act.

At first, Idris's reasons for disliking Timur seem justified. However, on closer examination, it becomes clear that Timur, by Idris's description, does not seem like a dislikeable person at all. He gives money to beggars, befriends strangers, is kind to those around him, and generally tries to improve the lives of others. The only reason Idris gives for *not* liking Timur is his showiness, which of course is a rather subjective way of perceiving someone.

It is easier to argue that Timur is an ethnically dodgy character when examining his real-life behaviour, without the descriptions being tainted by Idris's eyes. Timur drinks, flirts even though he is married with three children and gives a dishonest account of the reason why he and Idris have

returned to Afghanistan (to reclaim their old property). However, in comparison, Idris does not seem much better. He is self-righteous and selfish, his connection with Roshi frays as soon as he has escaped to the comfort of his life in the United States, and his compassion for Roshi and Amra can at best be attested to survivor's guilt and at worst is simply a part of his battle of egos with Timur. Roshi is simply giving him a role to play as guardian and savior, and the real reason why he is offering to help her is because of his jealousy of Timur's selflessness. Idris portrays Timur as a petty, jealous playboy, while in truth he is the petty and jealous one, and in general guilty of his lack of compassion. The truth is, Idris dislikes Timur because Timur reminds him of what he cannot be, and highlights his indifference to his own country.

In the end, of course, it is the sophisticated and self-righteous Idris who betrays Roshi and Amra; while Timur is the one who changes Roshi's life and provides her with comfort and pays for her surgery. The irony of this tale is biting; Idris makes bold promises to Roshi when he is in Afghanistan, which may seem easy because of his wealth and medical power, but as soon as he returns to the United States, distance separates him and Roshana, and his memory as well as his compassion fades. The suffering of Afghanistan and Roshi become unreal, reinforcing Hosseini's theme that time causes memory to become frayed, just as it has become for Pari (even though it has not been so for Abdullah).

The truth is, Idris pretends to be compassionate, and convinces himself he is so. He tries to justify his indifference with the excuse that he has worked hard throughout medical school and paid his dues, so that he has bought consent for his own selfishness. The very ridiculousness of this mentality causes the ending of his tale to play out in nightmarish narration as Idris is forced to reconcile himself with reality: he is neither compassionate nor responsible, as he tries to make himself out to be. In fact, it is Timur, whom he has tried to persuade both himself and the reader as selfish and conceited, who makes a difference instead of making empty promises. Idris's selfishness, and the decay of his memory and his connection with Roshi, is a reflection of the United States and its participation in the Afghan Wars, and Hosseini twists the knife even further when Roshi, recognising Idris at a book-signing event, secretly writes him a note: *Don't worry. You're not in it. America's intervention in the Afghan Wars was not an act of compassion. Instead, it instilled trauma in the lives of innocent victims, and in truth America is indifferent and callous towards the lives of the common people within the country. Like Idris, the US is interested in self-image and power plays, instead of the actual well-being of people.*

Adel and Gholam

The two boys represent two different worlds, separated into either end of the spectrum of social hierarchy. Adel lives a dull and monotonous life within the huge mansion built upon the home soil of the poor. Gholam lives a life of poverty, a troubled and unpredictable existence that is always full of adventure. The two of them find common ground despite their polarized social standing, and Adel realizes that Gholam knows more and has experienced more than he has. Here, the reader is

being asked a question: which is better, a life that one may control with free will, or a world where one is only ever expected to accept what comes?

Adel grows up idolizing and even hero-worshipping his father. He sees his father's good deeds with the eyes of a child who has been told what he has to believe: his father opens a school for girls, issues loans, favors, jobs for those economically deprived, treats everyone in the village like family; in fact his *Baba jan* is most likely only grants privileges to the people who his community, and ensnares them to gain their loyalty with wealth and prestige. Throughout Adel's idealistic conceptions of his father, the reader receives an opposite perception; by keeping the Commander's actions and hostility thinly veiled, it becomes certain that the Commander is just the opposite: he is selfish, oppressive and calculating. One might even presume him to be a member of the Taliban, a member of the terrorist group that suppresses innocent people.

Through Gholam's eyes, both Adel and the reader see the truth: the benevolent, loving *Baba jan* is in fact a figure of corruption, who uses wealth and power to escape consequences and squander the rights of the poor. Gholam and his family are the victims of such cruelty: their family land has been bulldozed to the ground and a mansion is erected in his place. All attempts to deliver an appeal to justice is overrun by the Commander's own power; the judge is bribed, the Commander refuses to see them or talk to them, Gholam's father is almost certainly killed or at least silenced when he attacks the Commander in a desperate attempt to reclaim his land, and Gholam bitterly notes that the Commander 'drives past like we're stray dogs'. Gholam is a representative of the plight of the poor: they have no claim to justice, and the wealthy and powerful pay them no attention. **They are dehumanized, having so little substance and are of so little importance to the rich that they have faded into the drab grey and ghostly shadows of the landscape.**

Adel and Gholam's relationship is multi-faceted. When one observes their first meeting, it is striking that one can find very little difference between their conversation and that of any other schoolboy in any other time and place. They bond over their mutual passion for soccer. They tell stories about their lives, polarized as they are, in terms of comfort, security and hardship. In this, they are reconciled in their mutual display of humanity and understanding, far from the cruel, inhumane methods with which the Commander treats those who do not surrender their loyalty and morals. This is the first stage of Adel's growth: as a pure, innocent child yet unaware of his father's cruelty, he is able to see Gholam, the son of the man who holds a grudge against his *Baba jan*, with the simple heart of a child, free from the double standards of adulthood.

And yet as Adel's friendship with Gholam grows, the interactions become more awkward, and neither are able to escape the truth of their separate realities: Adel is the son of the man who stole the land belonging to Gholam's family and silenced Gholam's own father. Gholam is the victim of social injustice and the vicious, miserable cycle of poverty. Their positions have tipped out of the balance of childhood ignorance as Gholam reveals more and more about the Commander's selfishness and his role in oppressing the weak. This is the transition in which Adel begins to grow and develop moral values. He knows and senses that what his father has done is morally wrong, and he admits that

he will never be able to love his father unconditionally as he did before. He migrates to adulthood, and begins to see through the secrets that his mother keeps hidden and his father never utters. He sees his own home as a monument to injustice. But worst of all, with this new knowledge comes acceptance – his previous shame and anger towards his mother for her silence becomes muted, because he has become her doppelganger, subjected to the same circumstances. He understands that both of them, at once prisoners and beneficiaries of this cruel system, have ‘no choice’ but to accept. And this is terrifying in its own right – that humanity, with their claims to conscience, mercy and empathy, can be subjected to this moral dilemma in such a way. In this, Adel’s growth arc is complete: he continues to love his father, although it is no longer unconditional but cynical and self-deluding. He has risen through the ignorance of childhood to the awareness of adulthood – even the purest, simplest concept that has always been possessed by humanity, love, has been corrupted and complicated.

In the end, Adel and Gholam’s relationship can be metaphorized as a circle. Their social positions are polarized on either side of the spectrum, such that their pure, simple friendship cannot reconcile the differences between rich and poor. And yet both of them share the same fate: they are unable to escape from the cruelty of the system, or their social hierarchy. Gholam remains confined to poverty, forced to perform manual labor and become head of his family despite his youth; Adel is the prisoner of the cruel system, and sacrifices his own morals to remain in a life of luxury and comfort just like his mother. Hosseini describes their fates with the words: ‘What choice was there? Adel could not run from his life any more than Gholam could from his.’ Their characterization, and the fates of the rich and the poor, come full circle: in the end, they meet in the center. Despite the polarization of their social positions, despite their disagreements, they meet, reconciled by their common fate: the ends of the circle meet.

And yet a single question is raised at the end, at least for me: Adel claims that he has no choice but to accept his life, to endure and live with the unimaginable. This conclusion that he comes to, I doubt greatly. He could stand up to his father, give up this life of luxury and security rather than sacrifice his own morality and conform to social injustice. Hosseini exposes the hypocrisy and cynical nature of adulthood in the final sentiment of Adel’s chapter: when Adel chooses to walk away from Gholam, to walk away from the oppression and the mess that his father has made of the lives of the poor, all he would feel is relief.

Markos and Thalia

In Chapter 4, Markos is simply the recipient of Nabi’s letter and the one who carries out Nabi’s last request: find Pari and reunite her with her brother. He also bears witness to Nabi’s narration, following his transformation from a young soul in love with a beautiful and seductive woman who is lacking in emotional capacity, to an old man ground down by the sands of time, saddened by his role in Suleiman Wahdati’s assisted suicide, sobered by Nila’s forgetfulness of him, and through his experience having understood the meaning of ‘consequences’. Nabi’s entrance into the novel is with the force that causes the rupture of Abdullah’s family and the belief that he is solving

the 'simple' problem of Saboor's family poverty. However, having witnessed Pari and Nila's departure to Paris, Suleiman's illness and receiving the news of Nila's suicide, Nabi has come to realise the core truth of the novel: the independent man is powerless to control the fates and destinies of others, given the complicated and interconnected nature of the world.

Being the reader of Nabi's narration, and Nabi's close friends in his elderly days, Markos is likely to be profoundly affected by Nabi's experience. However, the reader only truly gets to know Markos in Chapter 8, as he revisits his childhood years and his relationship with his mother, at the same time revealing why he has chosen to fly halfway across the world to a country ravaged by war -- his childhood friend, Thalia.

Markos is one of the few characters that feels truly identifiable to the reader in this book (the rest are rather out of touch, such as Parwana's psychological cue of extreme sibling jealousy, Nila's disappointment and consequential suicide, Abel being the son of an extremely rich terrorist leader); he has an overly and demanding mother, and as a result undergoes several years of identity crises before he settles down in a job he finds meaning in. His character arc also differs from the other characters: at first, he seems like an honorable man, having left behind, as Nabi says, his country, his friends, his family, to come to 'this god-forsaken city to help'; however, he depicts a childish and shallow version of his younger self in his tale. Markos is one of the few characters in this book who openly recognises his own faults instead of trying to hide them.

Markos's narrative mostly centers on four characters: Thalia, his mother Odelia, Odelia's childhood friend Madeleine, and himself. Madeleine has abandoned Thalia on Odelia's doorstep to pursue her own dreams of being an actress, and at every turn she comes across as arrogant and a narcissist; it is obvious that she has no real affection for her daughter at all. It is in Odelia's care that Thalia is able to come to terms with herself, for she is never treated as a charity case; in the other woman, Thalia finds understanding and respect.

A dog bite at a young age cost Thalia a severe facial deformity as well as her future. Markos explains this in a bitterly scathing condemnation: 'a world order I found disgraceful, one in which a dog bite could rob a little girl of her future, make her an outcast, an object of scorn.'

References

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