



## Epitome : International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

ISSN : 2395-6968

### ALLEGORIES, TOOLS AND SYMBOLS IN AND THE MOUNTAINS ECHOED



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#### About the Author :

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#### ABSTRACT

Symbols and allegories play an important role in literature. They, many a times, prepare the reader to expect certain way in which the writing may take path and scene may unfold. Khaled Hosseini, who is an Afghan-American writer, has written three novels which are read worldwide with all the three being prescribed for school studies in America. Though there have not been any Ph.D thesis on Hosseini's novels his impact on the world of modern literature cannot be denied-especially about the situation in Afghanistan. His novels are *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And the Mountains Echoed*. His first novel *The*

*Kite Runner* has been made into a movie in Hollywood. It has become a box office hit as well.

Khaled Hosseini deals with the problems, his country of birth, Afghanistan has faced during the insurgency and war. He has become a voice for the people who are deprived of their rights. In an amazing array of subjects he has written, Khaled Hosseini has talked about the negativities that are eating the Afghan society. In *The Kite Runner*, he has written about how ethnic difference in the country is eating the very fabric of the nation. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns* he talks about the condition of women who are deprived of dignity in their lives. The select novel *And the Mountains Echoed*, though has the backdrop of Afghanistan, deals more with the fears and follies of the people. He brings out the follies of the people and thereby he shows how they become culprits owing to their own wrongs. In building the novel Hosseini uses symbols, allegories and other tools. The usage of these tools helps Hosseini to make his ideas clear to the reader. The story of Abdullah and Pari which sees such profound tragedy makes one feel helplessness to be witnessing it. Thus Hosseini emerges successful in doing what he does the best-story telling.

### **KEYWORDS**

allegories, symbols, tools, Afghanistan, Khaled Hosseini

## RESEARCH PAPER

Khaled Hosseini, an Afghan-American writer has used Afghanistan as the backdrop in all his novels – *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And the Mountains Echoed*. He is a master story teller who brings his point home in a very lucid fashion making one feel one with the protagonists of his novels. In *And the Mountains Echoed*, Hosseini has tried to work away from what he had done in his previous two novels and has succeeded in doing justice to the characters. As it is the forte of Khaled Hosseini he has used a lot of symbols, exemplum and allegories to drive his thought home, in *And the Mountains Echoed*.

The interesting thing that sets *And the Mountains Echoed* apart is he starts his novel with a story which serves as an allegory to what happens next or in subsequent chapters. The novel starts with a story which sets the tone for the novel. The story of Baba Ayub who loved his wife and children immeasurably has some ominous thing foreboding in it. The writer manages to make one feel that all is not going to be fine as the novel proceeds further. One also starts feeling a craving to set things right but as Khaled Hosseini is very good at unfolding the novel as life unfolds always with a twist, one just watches desperate to claw at the happenings but cannot do anything as life does not give that chance. Baba Ayub's fear of losing his loved ones to the *div* comes true as *div* comes and knocks on his door. This can be implied to the poverty of the people who struggle to come out of its steel clutches. He does not want to give his children away. He has a favourite child among his children Qais, who is the darling of all as he is the youngest. Baba Ayub can never be away from this special kid of his who has a bell in his neck as a ruse to get to know when he walks in the sleep. When the *div* knocks on the door of Baba Ayub, he and his wife cannot decide which of their children has to be sent with the *div* who takes the child to an unknown land which nobody has seen so far. When they pick the names out of the dip, it is Qais, who has to be sent with the *div*. The moaning starts the moment the name comes on in the dip. Qais is given away to *div* and the door is closed on the child as he bangs on the door with his tiny fists. *Div* has no mercy. It takes the grieving child away. This is exactly the same way as Pari is given away to Wahdati by Saboor when the demand to meet his family expenses comes and when Nila Wahdati wants to adopt the beautiful Pari as her daughter. Qais is given away to *div* in the same way as Pari to Nila. Though Nila Wahdati promises to take care of her, Pari has to be uprooted from everything that she held dear and longed to be with. Her life used to revolve around her brother Abdullah and a dog which had befriended only her, Shuja. Shuja would never go anywhere but always wait for Pari patiently everyday to come out of her house. Pari is

content in her innocence with her brother and the feathers he used to collect for her. She is the happiest in his company.

...Pari's hand quickly slipped into Abdullah's. She was looking up at him, her eyes liquid, and she was smiling her gap-toothed smile like no bad thing would ever befall her so long as she stood at her side.

(Hosseini, Khaled. *And the Mountains Echoed* Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2014, pg. 20)

Qais, in the story narrated by Saboor to his children Abdullah and Pari, was also as unsuspecting as Pari was. He never imagined his family would ever give him away, as Pari never could suspect she was given away by her own father even in her middle age. Qais is taken away by *div*. his father almost goes mad for the beloved son once he leaves the place. Though, he had traded his son with the *div* to find happiness in life that happiness eludes him and he can never be happy ever after that. Even Saboor also goes through the same condition after having sent Pari to the Wahdatis. He in fact shared a good relationship with his wife's brother Nabi who was the driver to the Wahdatis. Once Pari is sent away to Wahdatis, he can never talk to Nabi as he feels it is him who had been instrumental in snatching his daughter away from him. In the story Baba Ayub goes in search of Qais ultimately reaching the palace of the *div*. The *div* having found such a brave man who had come all the way lets him see his son on the condition that the son would not be able to see him. Baba Ayub finds his loving Qais playing with his playmates merrily and without a trace of sorrow for having left his beloved family behind. In a way Baba Ayub is heartbroken. He wants to hold his son tight but the curse of the *div* does not allow him to do so. *Div* tells him that it will grant him a boon and that boon is nothing but the forgetfulness. He would forget even the fact that he had a son called Qais. Baba feels it to be a curse, but in reality it turns out to be a boon because the pain of having lost his son forever does not haunt him anymore. This proves to be a boon but at times he does feel melancholy whenever he hears the jingling sound of a bell. The bells seem to be reminding of some vague thing but he never gets to know what makes the sound of a bell painfully dear. This allegory of the story of Qais, Baba Ayub and the *Div* keeps drawing inferences throughout the novel, especially in the lives of Abdullah and Pari. Throughout his life Abdullah wants to meet his long lost sister but as he ages he becomes victim of the Alzheimer's and forgets that somebody could be his sister. His memory gets locked at the phase that he had a sister but that she could ever come to him in flesh and blood falls beyond his comprehension. He does remember he has a sister but when Pari tries to commit him to memory and tells him that she is his sister he even goes on to harm her. Thus the allegory of

Baba Ayub and his lovely son Qais plays throughout the novel with various people and at various locations. Pari, being young forgets everything as she grows yet has a deep void that sometimes aches her which she can never understand the reason for.

In an interview Khaled Hosseini has said when the interviewer asked him

Can you tell us a little about the title, *And the Mountains Echoed*?

The inspiration for it was *The Nurse's Song*, a lovely poem by William Blake, in which he ends a verse with the line, "And all the hills echoed."

"Well, well, go and play till the light fades away,

And then go home to bed.

The little ones leaped, and shouted, and laughed,

And all the hills echoed."

I changed "hills" to "mountains" partly because of the obvious nature of Afghanistan's topography, but also because of the pervasive presence of mountains in the book. In fact, the mountains in this book bear sole witness to a couple of key, pivotal events. Just as a mountain would echo back a shout, the fateful acts committed before the mountains too emit an echo. They have a rippling effect, expanding outward, touching lives further and further away. I liked the idea of a decision or an act echoing through both place and time, altering the fates of characters both living and not yet born.

(Mark, Lois Alter. May 21, 2013 *THE BLOG* 05/21/2013 05:33 pm

ET | Updated Jul 21, 2013 Khaled Hosseini on *And the Mountains*

*Echoed* [www.huffingtonpost.com/lois-alter-mark/khaled-hosseini-on-and-the\\_b\\_3304518.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lois-alter-mark/khaled-hosseini-on-and-the_b_3304518.html) retrieved on 25<sup>th</sup> July 2017)

As Khaled Hosseini has visualised the pain of having been separated travels far and wide throughout the lives of many characters. Saboor can never live happily after the unfortunate decision of re-territorialising Pari. He stops talking to Nabi. Nabi's visits to his village Shadbagh become rare and scanty till one day he finally stops going to his village. Even when he visits his sister's place it is as if he has been kept away for some reason even in the presence of all.

A chill had grown between us. My visit had been awkward, tense, even contentious. It felt unnatural to sit together now, to sip tea and chat about the weather or that year's grape harvest. We were feigning a normalcy, Saboor and I, that no longer was. Whatever was the reason I was in the end, the instrument of his family's rupture. Saboor did not

want to set eyes on me again and I understood. I stopped my monthly visits. I never saw them again. (Hosseini, Khaled. *And the Mountains Echoed* Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2014 pg.120)

Abdullah's walking away from his house is equivalent to the walking away of the protagonist in *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin whose 1889 novel stands as the harbinger of new era of writing in American literature. Though there she walks into the freedom only to commit suicide, but the walking away of Abdullah from his family too is a kind of suicide because he does not know where he is going and what security life has for him. He does not even know whether he will ever be getting a shelter above his head. Yet he walks away from his house because he cannot stay in a house which sold his loving sister away for keeping itself warm. He cannot be in the warmth which was bartered for with her sobs. He simply walks out into the unknown. He leaves the house as a feather which gets disconnected from a bird and gets hurled into the unknown carried away by the wind. This imagery is used by the writer very effectively.

...hurled by gusts of blistering wind across miles and miles of desert and mountains,... (Ibid. 56)

It does need courage to leave everything behind and walk the untrodden path. It needs immense faith in one's own self to walk all alone. He walks away as a rebellion against what his father chose to do to him and his little sister. He also walks away from the house with a feeling that he will meet his sister some day. He walks away against the prejudice of his father - the prejudice that sucked the very life out of his existence.

"The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings," Kate Chopin plaque, New York City library. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Awakening\\_\(Chopin\\_novel\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Awakening_(Chopin_novel)))

Abdullah's life from then on is not made known until later in the novel as half the novel is narrated by the perspective of Nabi. Hence one does not get to know much about Abdullah. But once one meets him in later chapters of the novel, we see that Abdullah still has the same kind of yearning for his sister. He has collected bird feathers of all colours and shapes to be given to her when he meets her. Feathers serve as tools through which he keeps the memory of his sister fresh. He never could once forget her. Feathers are the ones which connect him to her. The pain in Abdullah's heart is akin to a gnawing palpitation of an anxiety stricken man which never really vanishes but keeps striking back with renewed vigour having provoked at unexpected moments. He keeps her alive and fresh in his memory, as the little maid of

Wordsworth's "We are Seven" kept her dead brother and sister alive and keeps telling to the questioner that they are seven in all even when two of her siblings were dead.

"But they are dead; those two are dead!

"Their spirits are in heaven!"

'Twas throwing words away; for still

The little Maid would have her will,

And said, "Nay, we are seven!"

(Lyrical ballads/Volume 1/We are Seven

[https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Lyrical\\_ballads/Volume\\_1/We\\_are\\_Seven](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Lyrical_ballads/Volume_1/We_are_Seven)

downloaded on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2016

Like this maid Abdullah never accepts the fact that his sister would never come to him. He believes with utmost faith that he will be meeting her someday hence he keeps collecting feathers for her, which she as a kid liked. Hosseini uses the allegory of a feather which Pari gets when they all were going to Kabul. He feels someday he will meet his sister in the same way as she got the little yellow feather which may have got separated from the bird and crossed many miles before landing at Pari's feet.

When Alzheimer's disease strikes him Abdullah leaves a note to his sister in Farsi. He explains to Pari in that how he could never forget her all through his life and now that he was slipping into the area of general darkness of mind he may never see her again but he wishes she does one day get his letter and know that he loved her a lot. It is a pity that he could never see her when he was in his right senses.

*They tell me I must wade into waters, where I will soon drown. Before I march in, I leave this on the shore for you. I pray you find it, sister, so you know what was there in my heart as I went under.*

(Hosseini, Khaled. *And the Mountains Echoed* Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2014, pg. 460-461)

This note by Abdullah is the testimony that she was always there in his life. As the younger Pari says his sister could be seen in the melancholy of her father's face even when he was the witness or party to happy moments. The sadness of having lost his sister was like a birthmark (pg. 401) on Abdullah's face. The feathers which served as a means to shower his love on his little sister, later on become the agents which do tell Pari that her brother never forgot her and his pain of having lost her was greater than the pain which she experienced as she was protected by the forgetfulness of the young age.

Pari slowly shakes her head. She takes the box from me and

peers inside it. . . “Only that when we lost each other, Abdullah and I, it hurt him much more than me. I was the lucky one because I was protected by my youth. *Je ouvais oublier*. I still had the luxury of forgetting. He did not.” She lifts a feather, brushes it against her wrist, eyeing it as though hoping it might spring to life and take flight. “I don’t know what this feather means, the story of it, but I know it means he was thinking of me. For all these years. He remembered me.” (Ibid. 462)

Kahled Hosseini interlocks the lives of both the aunt Pari and the niece Pari. Younger Pari always feels she is drawn towards Pari as she shares the same name. She feels she is not different than her father’s sister. She had heard Pari’s story innumerable times. And she always asked her father to tell her the story as she was pulled into its gravity. (pg. 400) Pari feels connection between her and her aunt is for real though it is shrouded in mystery and dim. Little Pari always dreams that she would collect enough money in her piggy bank and would one day bring her father’s sister to him and make him happy. She also sees her aunt as her sibling with whom she has a great bonding. Since she could never meet her in her young days she keeps writing letters to her. The letters are the symbols of Pari’s innocence. When she is a child she keeps telling everything to Pari through letters which she keeps to herself. As she grows older her letter become less frequent subsequently she stops writing. But they do serve as symbols which let Pari-the elder, know how much she was missed by her family. William Wordsworth’s craving to see the girl who had influenced him to write “We Are Seven” long after he wrote the poem is akin to what Abdullah feels for his little sister. Abdullah’s pain is greater than Wordsworth’s but it can be summed up in Wordsworth’s words.

I have only to add that in the spring of 1841 I revisited Goodrich Castle, not having seen that part of the Wye since I met the little Girl there in 1793. It would have given me greater pleasure to have found in the neighbouring hamlet traces of one who had interested me so much; but it was impossible, as unfortunately I did not even know her name.

( Wordsworth, William. Lyrical Ballads, 1907 p. 293

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WE\\_Are\\_Seven#cite\\_ref-Wordsworth\\_p.\\_293\\_3-1](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WE_Are_Seven#cite_ref-Wordsworth_p._293_3-1)  
downloaded on 23<sup>rd</sup> November, 2016)

The *Div* of the story is an allegory to large world which is scary, unsympathetic and selfish. Nila becomes the scary world for Abdullah and Pari. She in her arrogance and self interest



thinks that everything will be fine, but that does not happen. Saboor's life also goes topsy turvy once Masooma falls from the tree and loses her limb. Life puts such questions to him that he becomes totally lost to the extent of selling his daughter away to a wealthy family.

“I don't blame you if you hate me. It's your right. But – and I don't expect you to understand, not now – this is for the best. It really is, Abdullah. It's for the best. One day you'll see.”

(Hosseini, Khaled. *And the Mountains Echoed* Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2014, pg. 51)

She tells Abdullah that she is snatching away his sister which will be good for him. Such a wrong impression of life Nila has. She thinks her money can buy happiness for all. Misplaced thought process of Nila makes her to be a pitiable character as the story proceeds. Nila Wahdati though initially feels very happy to have adopted a girl, tries to shower all her affection upon her. But Nila fails to realise that all the materialistic pleasures of the world do not provide any guarantee of happiness in life. She fails to understand the need of inner happiness. Or even if she knows about it, she fails to understand what makes one happy. She tells Abdullah that he would appreciate what she has done in future, but she herself can never be happy even though Pari was with her. Nila behaves exactly the opposite way in which Buddy – the protagonist behaves in the short story “Christmas Memory” by Truman Capote. Buddy does get other gifts on Christmas, but he loves the kite that his old friend Sook gives him, gathering which he goes out to fly the kite contentedly. All he needs is happiness and he knows how he can get it. (Capote, Truman. *A Christmas Memory* [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A\\_Christmas\\_Memory](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Christmas_Memory) downloaded on 24<sup>th</sup> November 2016)

Seeing her father's face in those photos stirred an old sensation in Pari, ...a feeling that she had had for as long as she could remember. That there was in her life the absence of something, or someone, fundamental to her own existence. Sometimes it was vague, like a message sent across shadowy byways and vast distances, a weak signal on a radio dial, remote, warbled. Other times it felt so clear, this absence, so intimately close it made her heart lurch. (Hosseini, Khaled. *And the Mountains Echoed* Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2014, pg. 214-215)

Khaled Hosseini works on strangeness that each one of the characters feels when thrown into the world. Every character tries to feel a sense of belongingness but that eludes each one of them. Nila's desire to be happy is the symbol of modern predicament of the human beings. She wants to be happy yet she is not ready to do anything to keep her family happy. She

keeps her own happiness above everything. When Suleiman Wahdati falls sick, she chooses to forsake him and go away to a different continent. She brings Pari along with her. But she starts to live a licentious life forgetting the impression it might have on young Pari. Pari grows up to detest such escapades of her mother. This leads her to be an introvert. Nila blames Pari for such behaviour rather than questioning her own self why Pari has become like that.

“I look at you sometimes and I don’t see me in you. Of course I don’t. I suppose that isn’t unexpected, after all. I don’t know what sort of person you are, Pari. I don’t know who you are, what you’re capable of, in your blood. You’re a stranger to me.”

“I don’t understand what that means,” Pari said. (Ibid. 235)

Another symbol that is used is that of mask. Thalia is made to put a mask on. The mask is the symbol of her subjugation to her mother. Her mother Madeline does not want to be seen with deformed Thalia whose face is bitten by a dog when she was a young girl. Hosseini has used mask as ‘shame’. But it is Odelia who realises whose shame it is. As Odelia can clearly see, the mask is put on Thalia’s face as Madeline did not want to be seen with such deformity. So the mask on Thalia’s face is actually a mask for Madeline. Mask is a symbol of Madeline’s ugliness that is within her. She is so ugly that she does not want to stay with her own daughter. She forsakes her with Odelia and goes away. The mask on Thalia’s face is a symbol which tries to hide Madeline’s restlessness in her daughter’s company. She thrives on her self-importance. She does not care about Thalia at all. Once she leaves her on the island she never comes back even once to see her own daughter. This is how the existentialism has taken root in the human life. Even a mother is not ready to take care of her child.

The symbol of the tree which is cut by Saboor is very heart wrenching. The oak tree serves as a marking of a land that belongs to Saboor. He as a kid was very reverential of that old tree which according to him had seen even the army of Genghis Khan march past the place. But after he sends Pari away to Wahdati’s he becomes so restless that he cuts the tree off with such disgust as if to mean he has no more daughters left to sell them away to keep his family warm. It also was to mean how this tree had been instrumental in rendering Masooma immobile. Saboor and Masooma’s story had developed under the same tree. But the tree stands tall while Saboor’s life gets shattered. The tree reminds him of his failure in life. Hence he chops the tree off. The same tree stump remains as a mark of the land which belongs to Omar when he comes back to claim it with his family from the refugee camp of Pakistan. The same tree stump also becomes a reason to show how rich are far removed from

the predicaments of the poor. Adel's father looking at the tree stump calls the one who might have cut the old tree a fool. But he does not realise that the tree was cut in such desperation as there was nothing to keep the family warm in the frosty winter of Afghanistan.

There is another symbol that runs through the novel-the symbol of an island. Markos' mother Odelia lives in an island called Tinos. She has an aversion to the people who come from other places. She cannot trust non islanders. As she cannot trust them, she does not want to go out of the island. Neither does she want her son to go away from island. She herself has become an island. In the same fashion Thalia becomes an island. She also does not leave Tinos once she gets accustomed to that place. Even when she gets a chance to go out she does not go to pursue her education also. Thus they are the islands themselves who do not want to get connected with anybody. They live in their own sweet world where they do not let anyone come into.

Nila Wahdati's mammoth ego is the tool through which Hosseini shows the negativity that creeps into the lives of all connected and ultimately eats up that person. Nila who lives life on her own terms cannot digest it when her daughter starts to do the same. When Pari tells Nila about Julien and herself, she fumes at Pari. This pushes her off the cliff and leads her to her death. She dies a death of a lonely person. Even Pari does not stay with Nila during her last days. The wrong decisions that she took in her early life lead Nila to the loneliness. She always wants to be loved and cared for, but it does not happen that way. She thinks by changing the things the way she likes she would buy happiness but it does not happen so. She gets doomed as happiness is quite a relative abstract. Uprooting Pari from her life when she was a kid does not guarantee happiness for Nila. Hosseini brings a point home very poignantly that life has its own plans. Whatever plans a human being makes should be complemented by the bigger plan if not all the things fall flat. Nila who thought she would 'bring' happiness into the lives of Pari and all others ultimately could not find it in her own life. Nila's karma does not leave her. She who acts as being the saviour of others is left helpless and broken as her end approaches. In "Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets," Gilderoy Lockhart takes credit for other people's achievements then erases their memories. In the end, a memory charm backfires from a broken wand and he loses his memory. (<http://examples.yourdictionary.com/examples-of-karma.html#yq37tvMD6M1OcUMM.99>)

Retrieved on 24<sup>th</sup> November 2016)

Hosseini thus masterfully portrays how life loses meaning for those who start to carve life according to their taste and hurt others on the way in doing so. Pari does think about it when she gets a copy of the magazine in which her mother's interview was published.

...Pari thinks, this is Maman's retribution. Not only for Julien but also for the disappointment that Pari has always been. Pari, who was maybe supposed to bring an end to all the drinking, themen, the years squandered making desperate lunges at happiness. All the dead ends pursued and abandoned. Each lash of disappointment leaving Maman more damaged, more derailed, and happiness more illusory. (Hosseini, Khaled. *And the Mountains Echoed* Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2014, pg. 251)

Thus Khaled Hosseini uses many tools like allegories and symbols to bring a kind of foreboding expectancy to the novel *And the Mountains Echoed*. The style employed tells, in a clear fashion, things about life. Allegories and symbols used in the novel make the human efforts look so tiny yet heroic against what is bound to happen in life. This connects one with the characters and their follies.

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