

And the Mountains Echoed

by

Khaled Hosseini

And the Mountains Echoed, the third novel by Afghan-American novelist Khaled Hosseini, is a work of family historical fiction that examines the factors that reverberate from one action: a poor family sells their youngest daughter to a wealthy couple in Kabul. Set in Afghanistan, the novel spans over fifty 50 years and four generations. Hosseini includes several narrative voices, including those of characters disconnected from the main family. The multiple narrators provide several different angles into the grand chronicle of the main family, but they also each examine their own place in the account and the motives behind their actions. Although this technique provides insights that might otherwise be unknowable to a reader, there are many noticeable similarities between the main characters and the unconnected narrators. Riverhead Books first published the novel in 2013, and it follows *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

Hosseini devotes the entire opening chapter to a fable told by a father to his children. This fable serves several functions: First, it establishes Saboor as a storyteller; he is revered for this skill, which he will pass on to his son Abdullah. Second, storytelling is one of the major motifs in this novel, and so it is only appropriate that the author establishes this central aspect from the beginning. The theme in this fable foreshadows ideas that will reemerge in the lives of the different narrators in the novel. One of these is that, on occasion, individual sacrifices need to be made for the good of others. Another premise is that lost memory is at once a curse and a blessing. There is also the suggestion, later in the novel, that, despite family ties having been broken and memories lost, there is an elementary connection between people that cannot be lost—viz., between the main characters Pari and Abdullah later in the story. In the same way that Baba Ayub does not remember his son, but just faintly recalls him when he hears bells, Pari and Abdullah cannot remember each other, but nevertheless have realized that an integral part of their lives is missing.

It is the sale of Pari that sets all the rest of the plot in motion, and which causes the characters to follow their trajectories of longing, absence, loss, and half-truths. Abdullah loves his sister dearly, and Nabi even remarks that he “never [saw] such affinity between two beings.” He also notes that the “sudden emotional mayhem” that occurred when the two siblings were separated. When Abdullah remembers the story of the div his father told him the night before, it becomes clear that Hosseini wants the reader to connect this fable with the situation between the Wahdatis and Abdullah’s family. Saboor may have told this story to Abdullah to prepare him for what was to happen with his sister. He most likely wanted him to believe that selling Pari “would lead to a greater long-term good for all involved,” and that Pari would be better off with her new, rich parents, just as

the boy was better off with the div. However, what is missing from Abdullah's family that is present in the fable is the potion that will wipe away memory so that the suffering of sacrificing a family member will not haunt them. Not yet, anyway. The memory potion foreshadows that Abdullah will also forget his lost loved one when he succumbs to dementia in his old age..

The oak tree, which all of the children will swing from, symbolizes childhood innocence. When Saboor aggressively chops down the tree, it is as though he is trying to destroy his own childhood, perhaps in an attempt to harden himself against the pain of losing Pari. At the same time, he is destroying the symbolic innocence of everyone in the family. The tree, the family's innocence, and Pari are all sacrificed for what the family considers the greater good.

Hosseini takes us back three years in Chapter Three, to show us a glimpse of Parwana's life before she married Saboor. In this chapter, we have another story involving the separation of siblings that is meant to bring a "better" outcome for both of them in the long run. Hosseini immediately presents the difficult relationship between Parwana and Masooma; he successfully invokes a little bit of sympathy, and to provide a reason as to why Parwana would agree to abandon Masooma. Parwana had a certain resentment of her sister, seeing how admired Masooma was for her beauty; she also lived—perhaps with a sense of guilt—in the shadow of Masooma's "accident," and yet, if Parwana was to blame, she is now forced to be Masooma's caregiver. She sacrificed her sister, which then made her sacrifice herself in service, which then led Masooma to sacrifice herself in order that Parwana might have a better life. Is this sidebar meant to provide an interpretation of Pari's sacrifice? And yet, Masooma's sacrifice will likely end in her death; when Parwana abandons her in the desert, she is leaving her alone, unable to move and exposed to the elements. There is no happy life with the div for Masooma, as in the fable.

Chapter Four then adds an epistolary element to the novel, though I can't help but to point out that the texture of the prose seems very much the same regardless of the person or the point of view of the narrator. In this letter from Nabi we learn some details concerning the circumstances surrounding Pari's history. It was Nabi's idea to sell her, and he did it for reasons he believed were of goodwill; he has a "mostly clean conscience." He believed it would be a "solution" that would bring him his own satisfaction, for he hoped that Nila "may begin to see [him] as something more than the loyal servant." As in Chapter Three, we are presented with a plot of altering another's life with an intent on improving one's own life—an idea that again appears with respect to Nabi's duties with the invalid, Suleiman. Although it is not outwardly spoken, Nabi takes on the uncomfortable role of Suleiman's caregiver out of duty, and perhaps guilt. He also recognizes the impact that Pari's separation from Abdullah has had on both of them. And although in the form of a letter, the theme of sacrifice that first appeared in Chapter Three appears in Chapter Four as well: Just as Masooma sacrificed herself so that Parwana could have a better life, Suleiman offers Nabi a way out of the role of caregiver; but Nabi, not wanting a child and realizing that he enjoys being needed by

Suleiman, declines. He, then, is the one who sacrifices having a family of his own to care for Suleiman.

Chapter Four also provides insights into Nila's character. Although she is still something of a mystery, we know that she has suffered and is unable to have children. That background may contribute to her inscrutable manner, as Nabi notes that she is unlike any woman he has ever known; and it may also be what contributes to her sense of emptiness, despite having wealth and an adopted child. While the novel previously painted her as an unfeeling adulteress who was unable to bring herself to care for her ailing husband, we learn that her relationship with her husband was wrenched because of his affections for Nabi. Thus Nila changes from a seemingly callous and selfish character to a sympathetic one. Chapter Two had foreshadowed this turn when Abdullah noted that Nila seemed broken, sensing "something alarming about her [. . .] something deeply splintered."

Chapters Five, Seven, and (to a lesser extent) Eight present narrations that seem only tangentially related to the main story in a time at least forty years in the future. They seem to serve the function as something of an entr'acte or a satyr play, a retelling of the same themes of the main play, but from an alternative perspective, except of course here they are completely lacking in of any sense of irony or comedy. Chapter Five introduces us to the story of Idris, a neighbor of the Wahdatis, but who otherwise has no connection to the story of Abdullah and Pari. Idris, although at first moved by Roshi's story, is unable to follow through on his promises to help her. His life in the United States overwhelms him, but as he is removed from the troubles in Kabul, he has little genuine motivation to assist. This subplot illustrates Hosseini's suggestion that duty and obligation are connected through family; because Idris is not really a part of the story of the suffering in Kabul, his sense of duty is not as strong as that of others. Nevertheless, Markos is not even an Afghan, and yet he has stayed on in Kabul to help rebuild it. Idris's role in the larger story to explain another dimension of personal sacrifice—a calculated step for a person's own gain, or a manifestation of a sense of guilt, or (as in Markos's case) stemming from an excuse to escape from another life. Idris, whose story is here presented in the burlesque form befitting an entr'acte, feels no strong sense of conviction and lacks the strength of character to give something up in order to afford help. Instead of sacrificing his own attention and time to help Roshi, he chooses to forget about her and to return to the Western world. When Roshi recovers and writes her story, it is clear that she feels that she was abandoned by Idris, and he does not become the hero he might have been hoped he would have become. This story suggests that Idris was interested in helping Roshi for the wrong reasons from the beginning.

The second entr'acte connects to the main story by its setting at the oak tree, now in the distant future, where a new family—that of Adel—now possesses the land. Adel's situation is similar to Idris's, in that they both accept their family and lifestyle for the way it is, despite being faced with the unlikeable truth about Afghanistan. Adel admits, "He [will] adapt" to this truth, much like Idris

did when he returned to the United States and forgot about Rosh. Adel, although he knows the uglier side of his father, nevertheless accepts his circumstances as the way they are.

Thus Hosseini presents another examination of the family bond that has been his theme throughout. In the main story, it is often tied with duty, obligation, and sacrifice; but in this case, it is in Adel's acceptance of how things are regardless of how he might have preferred otherwise. This is something of a twist on family duty: Adel must be loyal to the image of the family despite his knowing its darker realities. And yet, it is the tie between family members that often cause people to be bound to the life they are given.

Knowing what happens to subsequent generations of Saboor's family makes the sale of Pari seem insignificant; though the extra money may help the family get by, they ultimately lose their home and property to Baba-jan. From this perspective, Parwana's abandonment of her sister to pursue a relationship with Saboor also seems futile. Regardless of these sacrifices, the family is worse off at the end of the tale and has no home. Gholam believes the former tree, which symbolized the family's innocence, used to grant wishes. The passing down of this myth suggests the family is nostalgic for the time when the tree was whole.