

## Love amidst War: Bonds of Love in Khaled Hosseini's *And the Mountains Echoed*

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### Abstract

Khaled Hosseini is a prominent Afghan American writer who is known for bringing the travesties of his homeland to the forefront through his sensitive portrayal of Afghanistan. Hosseini rose to fame with the publication of his first book *The Kite Runner* in 2003. In 2007 his second book *A Thousand Splendid Suns* was released which like his first book was also set in the battered milieu of Afghanistan. His third novel was called *And the Mountains Echoed* and it was published in 2013. *And the Mountains Echoed* was summarized by Hosseini as a 'fairy-tale turned on its head.' It is a multi-generational saga that encompasses decades, with characters spreading over Afghanistan, France, and Greece. The heart of the book though lies in capturing the tumultuous land of Afghanistan and its people within their homeland and as immigrants grappling for a footing in foreign lands. It is observed that amidst all, a single emotion that stands out is the element of love, be it filial love or love in its myriad manifestations. Love becomes an enduring force in this novel which propels the characters through the strife and the uncertainties of their war-ravaged land. This paper aims to analyze the varied concepts of love in the novel *And the Mountains Echoed*. It will also make an earnest attempt to trace how love as an expression helps the characters waddle through the murky waters of subjugation in their homeland as well as battle alienation as exiles. The paper will also examine the varied kinds of love that is eros, philia, agape, and storge in the context of the novel and trace how the characters in *And the Mountains Echoed* veer towards holding the reins of the many kinds of love and forge through the journey called life.

**Keywords:** Alienation; Exile; Homeland Immigrant; Love.

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## Introduction

Love is a universal phenomenon that leaves an indelible effect on people and the kind of lives they lead. In literature love is a theme that has more often than not permeated into the very fabric of human relationships. It is an abiding force that propels the multitudes of characters and a keen insight would delineate the fact that no one remains oblivious to the many manifestations of love. Francis Bacon in his essay *Of Love* states, "The stage is more beholding to love, than the life of man. For as to the stage, love is ever a matter of comedies, and now and then of tragedies; but in life, it doth much mischief; sometimes like a siren, sometimes like a fury." (Bacon 42). Francis Bacon suggests that love is depicted rather unrealistically in plays and it fringes towards romanticism when it comes to the portrayal of the sheer concept of love. Moreover, he infers that love seldom leads to happiness and it is a road wrought with suffering. But whether it abounds you in immeasurable joy or wrecks you one cannot overlook the significance of love as an emotion in human relationships. Over the years philosophers have propounded many theories attempting to understand the kinds of love that human beings experience and how it affects their lives. Literature brims with stories in which love as an emotion often takes centre-stage and helps shape the lives of the many characters. One such book that depicts a realistic portrayal of love amidst war and subjugation is *And the Mountains Echoed* by Khaled Hosseini.

Khaled Hosseini is a prominent Afghan American writer who is unarguably credited for not only bringing the travesties of his homeland Afghanistan to the forefront but for also debunking the myths that loomed large over the Afghan soil post 9/11. Often heralded as a publishing phenomenon of sorts, Hosseini rose to fame with the publication of his first book *The Kite Runner* in 2003. In 2007 his second book *A Thousand Splendid Suns* was released which like his first book was also set in the battered milieu of Afghanistan. His third novel was called *And the Mountains Echoed* and it was published in 2013. *And the Mountains Echoed* was summarized by Hosseini as- "The book is kind of like a fairy-tale turned on its head. You have a very painful rupture at the beginning and then this tearful reconciliation at the end, except the revelations and the reconciliations you're granted aren't the ones you're expecting. Which is how life is, really" (Hoby). Though not as structured as his previous two novels, *And the Mountains Echoed* remains his most ambitious project which crosses continents and not only portrays the terrible fates of Afghan citizens but also touches upon the refugee crisis, the expatriate experience, and lastly, the rehabilitation work done by doctors and nurses from around the world

to bring stability in Afghanistan. In this regard, *And the Mountains Echoed* has a much broader spectrum. Love is a force that propels the actions of the varied characters etched out by Hosseini in this novel. The stories that brim with grief, remorse, and a yearning for atonement stem from the universal emotion that is love. While waddling through the curveballs that life throws at them, love becomes a redeeming force for the myriads of characters in *And the Mountains Echoed*. This paper will make an earnest attempt to analyze how the different kinds of love present in the book help the characters forge ahead through the battered milieu of the war-stricken land of Afghanistan.

### ***And the Mountains Echoed: Web of Relationships Tied by Love***

*And the Mountains Echoed* like Hosseini's other books is also woven around familial relationships. But the structure is remarkably different as in *And the Mountains Echoed* Hosseini presents in a rather unstructured manner much in a short story-like format, interconnected stories of love, grief, despair, and sacrifice. At the core of it, one may see it as an enduring tale of love between the siblings Pari and Abdullah, but as we traverse through the varied timelines in a land wrecked by subjugation, we come across an array of characters. These characters cross generations and continents yet the one common denominator in them all is the bond of love in its varied shades that make them trudge along the crests and troughs of life.

The story begins as Saboor in a distant Afghan village called Shadbagh narrates a folk-tale to his children Abdullah and Pari. The tale symbolizes filial love and sacrifice and at once puts us in the thick of the arid Afghan land. The story that takes centre stage is the story that depicts the immense love and unfortunate separation of the two siblings Pari and Abdullah. Crippled with penury, Saboor gives away his daughter Pari to the affluent Wahdatis at the behest of his brother-in-law Nabi. Thus, Hosseini establishes early on that love more often than not is closely akin to sacrifice and sorrow. Saboor appeared as steady as a rock as he bid adieu to his little girl for, he knew she would be better off with the rich Wahdatis. Yet this act of sacrificial love numbed him and he was a changed man. Abdullah too was aware of his father's plight.

"Sometimes, in unguarded moments, he caught Father's face clouding over, drawn into confusing shades of emotion. Father looked diminished to him now, stripped of something essential." (Hosseini 47)

Hosseini weaves a web of interconnected characters and we are made

privity to the lives of Suleiman Wahdati and his wife Nila Wahdati. Nabi, Saboor's brother-in-law who facilitates Pari's adoption is the fulcrum of the saga. There is a nod to same-sex love too though unrequited through Suleiman and Nabi. There is also the platonic love between Dr. Markos a Greek Plastic Surgeon and Thalia. Strong and steady despite her horrific past and disfigured face, Thalia is loved by Markos almost as his sister. Parwana and Masooma are sisters and their story of envy has also undercurrents of love and guilt. Then there is also the story of the brothers Timur and Idris who like all immigrants come back to their homeland and yearn to make a difference in the lives of the people who are left shattered owing to the aftermaths of perpetual conquests. Idris who is a doctor is deeply moved by the story of Roshi who he meets through a foreign aid worker in Afghanistan called Amra. Hosseini here depicts the expatriate experience as well as the selfless love that foreign aid workers, doctors, and nurses showed in Afghanistan which was still reeling under the effects of war and turbulence.

The novel is thus an amalgamation of stories tied together by a thread of love. Hosseini states about the book:

I think at the core, all three of my books have been love stories – and they haven't been traditional love stories in the sense that a romantic love story between a man and a woman, you know, they've been stories of love between characters where you would not expect love to be found. So, it is always these intense relationships that form under unexpected circumstances. (NPR)

### **Kinds of Love and their Manifestations in *And the Mountains Echoed***

The word 'love' can have different connotations. It is a multifaceted concept which can be accorded different meanings in different situations. A similar thought is delineated in the research paper, *Philosophy of love*:

The words, "I love you," take on very different meanings when said to a spouse, to a parent, or to a friend. While the English language appointed only one word to the multifaceted concept of "love," the Greeks invented three words for it: "eros," "philia," and "agape." It comes as little surprise that philosophers across time have debated which the highest form of love is. (Perlman)

C.S. Lewis in his book, *The Four Loves* attempted to establish that love can be characterized into four types. The one prominent theme of *And the*

*Mountains Echoed* as already discussed is love amidst the terror embroiled land of Afghanistan. Sorrow is more often than not an offshoot of love in *And the Mountains Echoed* and yet love is a perennial force that binds the stories together. Nabi one of the prime characters in the book echoes this thought when he says, "I know now that some people feel unhappiness the way others love, privately, intensely, and without recourse." (Hosseini 130). Herein it is interesting to gauge as to what extent the varied relationships as depicted in *And the Mountains Echoed* fall under the categories of love as laid out by the Greeks and then further analysed by the British writer C.S. Lewis in the aforementioned book *The Four Loves*. (Lewis)

Lewis maintained that there are four kinds of love, namely affection, friendship, eros and charity. (Lewis)

### **Storge/Affection**

Storge or Affection is the love that exists between a parent and a child and vice-versa. Lewis puts across a vivid imagery in our minds to understand affection as a form of love. He says, "The image we must start with is that of a mother nursing a baby, a bitch or a cat with a basketful of puppies or kittens; all in a squeaking, nuzzling heap together; punings, lickings, baby-talk, milk, warmth, the smell of young life." (Lewis 53-54). Though affection is deemed as a pure kind of love, Lewis points out that it is something which is expected out of a person. One is expected to love his/her child and the child in turn feels entitled to the love irrespective of anything. It is evident when he says, "But Affection is often assumed to be provided, readymade., by nature; "built-in," "laid-on," "on the house. We have a right to expect it. If the others do not give it, they are "unnatural." This assumption is no doubt the distortion of a truth. Much has been "built-in." Because we are a mammalian species, instinct will provide at least some degree, often a high one, of maternal love. Because we are a social species familiar association provides a milieu in which, if all goes well, Affection will arise and grow strong without demanding any very shining qualities in its objects. If it is given us, it will not necessarily be given us on our merits. Yet affection is the humblest form of love as it "gives itself no airs." (Lewis 55). Therefore, affection is deemed as a feeling which is intrinsically present in humans and animals.

### **Storge/Affection in *And the Mountains Echoed***

**Pari and Abdullah:** Pari and Abdullah's relationship is the focal point of the book and like a spool of thread other characters stem out of these two

pivotal characters. It is the undying love and the consequent separation around which the book is centred. Affection as a category of love as mentioned above translates into filial love. But here Abdullah was not just a brother but also a father-figure in Pari's life. He had slipped into the role of a parent early on:

"He was the one raising her. It was true. Even though he was still a child himself. Ten years old. When Pari was an infant, it was he she had awakened at night with the squeaks and mutters, he who walked and bounce her in the dark. He had changed her spoiled diapers. He had been the one to give Pari her baths.... He loved the fact that he was the one to help with his first step, to gasp at her first uttered word. This was his purpose, he believed, the reason God had made him, so he would be there to take care of Pari when He took away their mother." (Hosseini 31)

It was a reciprocal love wherein Pari too responded to Abdullah's love whole-heartedly. The pure and unadulterated love between the duo is evident in the following conversation:

"Abollah?"

"Yes."

"When I grow up, will I live with you?"

"If you want. But you won't want to."

"Yes, I will!"

"You'll want a house of your own."

"But we can be neighbours."

"Maybe."

"You won't live far."

"What if you get sick of me?"

"I wouldn't!"

Abdullah grinned to himself. "All right, fine."

"You'll be close by."

"Yes."

"Until we're old."

"Very Old."

"For always."

"Yes, for always."

From the front of the wagon, she turned to look at him. "Do you promise, Abollah?"

"For always and always." (Hosseini 25-26)

There was a tenderness in the love which the siblings had which made this fall into the category of affection. And it is this enduring force which stays despite separation, distance, and time. From Afghanistan to France to USA, the siblings spend years apart yet there was a longing which lurked at some corner of their hearts.

**Baba Ayub and Qais:** The novel commences with the story of Baba Ayub and his beloved son Qais. Hosseini put this story within the story to convey the larger theme of the book, that is how love leads to pain and sacrifice. Here Baba Ayub hands over his child to a *div* for the larger good of the village. Though when he realizes that his son Qais is much happier staying on an enchanted land away from the penury-stricken village of Maidan Sabz, he sacrifices his love for his most loved child with the *div*. His heart still pines for him but his parental love makes him see what was best for his child.

"You are a good father, the *div* said, as Baba Ayub passed him by." (Hosseini 12).

This is an example of storge which is crucial as it lays the groundwork for the varied characters that are to be depicted in *And the Mountains Echoed* each stuck in a quagmire of love and suffering.

### **Philia/Friendship**

Philia or friendship is the kind of love that one has for his/her friends. Lewis puts forth the argument that, "Friendship is the least biological of our loves. Both the individual and the community can survive without it" (Lewis 94). But having said that he goes on to establish that Philia or Friendship remains an integral element of love which help the society thrive. He elucidates the significance of Philia furthermore by the following argument:

Every civilised religion began in a small group of friends. Mathematics effectively began when a few Greek friends got together to talk about numbers and lines and angles. What is now the Royal Society was originally a few gentlemen meeting in their spare time to discuss things which they (and not many others) had a

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fancy for. What we now call “the Romantic Movement” once was Mr. Wordsworth and Mr. Coleridge talking incessantly (at least Mr. Coleridge was) about a secret vision of their own.” (Lewis 100).

Therefore, Philia though not biological in nature is a form of love which is instrumental in strengthening human relationships and aiding them through rough patches. Professor Lee Perlman vehemently argues in one of his research papers as to how Philia is the highest form of love:

My view is that philia is the highest form of love, for three reasons. Firstly, unlike erotic and agapic love, philic love treats the beloved not as an object with qualities, but as an actual human being with an essence. Secondly, whereas erotic love and agapic love are unidirectional, philic love is a two-way street that requires the mutual participation of both the lover and beloved. Lastly and most importantly, philia is a relationship between the consciousness of the lover and beloved (Perlman 1).

Indeed, the relationship one has with his/her friends is of mutual understanding and love. It can never be a one-way street and it involves the equal participation of both the parties. This kind of love thrives on the edifice of respect and camaraderie.

### **Philia/Friendship in *And the Mountains Echoed***

**Markos and Nabi:** Markos was a Greek plastic surgeon who was serving in Afghanistan which was reeling under the post-war atrocities. Lewis maintains that friendship is companionship as he says, “Friendship arises out of mere Companionship when two or more of the companions discover that they have in common some insight or interest or even taste which the others do not share and which, till that moment, each believed to be his own unique treasure (or burden)” (Lewis 96). Moreover, two ailing souls too come together to form a friendship while looking to heal themselves in each other’s company. Markos and Nabi with empty crevices in each one’s kind heart, develop a companionship which is heart-warming:

Let me state now what a pleasure it has been to know you over the last seven years, Mr. Markos. As I write this, I think fondly of our yearly ritual of planting tomatoes in the garden, your morning visit to my small quarters for tea and pleasantly, our impromptu trading of Farsi and English lessons. I thank you for your friend-



ship, your thoughtfulness, and for the work that you have undertaken in this country... (Hosseini 74).

The philial love that exists between Markos and Nabi after the post-Taliban era is instrumental in the final reunion of Pari and Abdullah, thereby bringing the story to a bitter sweet culmination.

### **Eros/Romance**

“Eros is what we think of, when we think of “love.” It is what we all want and need, our main worry and source of concern, but when it comes to defining it, we are surprisingly short of apt words. Very tentatively, let’s think of it in terms of the passionate attachment we feel for one special individual, who is seen as beautiful, desirable, and valuable” (Sara 71). Eros is by and large associated with sexual love and is what people generally associate love with. Yet though amorous, eros can also be the kind of love which has the potential to drive a person into extreme acts for the object of his/her affection. It can be a propelling force in human relationships and oft can make or break a person. It can be unrequited love as well which in turn can offer nothing but misery to the person in question.

### **Eros/Romance in *And the Mountains Echoed***

The most intriguing relationship in the novel *And the Mountains Echoed* has undercurrents of eros love. Nabi, who was the Wahdatis’ driver had a liking for Nila Wahdati, the rebellious poetess. He could not help admire and glance furtive looks at his master’s wife. And what is interesting is that it is this love which had the undertones of eros love which prompts Nabi to propose the idea of Pari’s adoption. In a bid to offer solace to the childless Nila and to impress her, Nabi sets in motion something which forms the very edifice of the novel *And the Mountains Echoed*. His love is visible in these initial descriptions. Glimpses of eros is pretty evident through Nabi’s words wherein he describes his encounters with Nila:

It was then that the front gates opened and a black-haired young woman emerge. She wore sunglasses and a short-sleeved tangerine-coloured dress that fell short of the knees. Her legs were bare, and so were her feet. I did not know whether she had noticed me in the car, and, if she had, she offered no indication. She rested the heel of one foot against the wall behind her and, when she did, the hem of her dress pulled up slightly and thus revealed a bit of the thigh beneath. I felt a burning spread down from my cheeks

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to my neck (Hosseini 80).

### **Agape/Charity**

Agape is often referred to as the highest form of love. There are different kinds and degrees of agape. And Lewis makes a valid distinction between them thereby throwing significant insights into agape love:

C.S. Lewis makes the compelling distinction between what he calls Gift-Love and Need-Love, the former being a higher form of love than the latter. An example of Gift-Love is a father who toils to work hard and denies himself pleasure so that he can save enough money for a secure future for his children...an example of Need-Love is a child who falls down, hurts his knee, and runs to his mother for comfort. This is not a selfish act but of mutual love. Gift-Love may be mutual, but on its highest level, it is entirely self-giving for the sake of others. This is agape or what he calls charity. This agape love is more than altruism" (Enright et al.).

Since agape love is unconditional, it is considered as the highest form of love there is. Offering an analogy of a garden, Lewis delineates the concept that agape is akin to the acceptance and the love for God or a higher power (Lewis163).

### **Agape/Charity in *And the Mountains Echoed***

Markos Varvaris is a Greek plastic surgeon who devotes his life as a rescue worker to treat children in war affected countries. Leaving his own mother behind he serves people in Afghanistan, thereby exhibiting a form of selfless love or agape. Through Dr. Markos Hosseini has attempted to put forth the harsh realities and the aftermaths of war. Markos acts as his mouthpiece who is out in the world to make a difference and offer a helping hand to the ones suffering, sans any vested interest. Though a supporting character Markos is instrumental in reuniting the brother and sister pair of the protagonists Pari and Abdullah. His selfless love and sense of duty towards humankind thus is an important element in the book and draws our attention towards agape being a superior kind of love which the world needs at large.

### **Conclusion**

Khaled Hosseini in *And the Mountains Echoed* echoes the sentiment that

love is an all pervasive and enduring force which can cross continents and traverse through centuries. Though he refrains from drawing out the terrors of war vividly but the consequences of it are present in the travesties faced by the characters. And the theme of love meanders all along which propels the characters to thwart as well as accept the challenges life throws at them time and again. It is interesting as to how we find traces of the different kinds of love be it affection, philia, eros or agape. The varied shades of love add layers to this multi-generational saga and at once the reader is able to feel the helplessness of the characters brought alive by Hosseini.

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