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Literary Theories

Broken Bonds and Enduring Echoes: Family, Separation, and Identity in *And the Mountains Echoed*

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Abstract: Khaled Hosseini's *And the Mountains Echoed* presents family separation as a defining force in the formation of identity across generations and geographies. This paper examines how broken familial bonds create enduring emotional and cultural echoes that shape individual lives long after physical separation occurs. Drawing on theories of cultural memory and diaspora, the study explores how loss, displacement, and silence operate within familial relationships, influencing selfhood and belonging. The novel's fragmented, multi-voiced narrative structure mirrors the fractured identities of its characters, revealing how personal histories are interwoven with broader social and historical contexts. Separation, whether caused by poverty, migration, or war, becomes a recurring motif that transcends national boundaries and temporal limits. The paper argues that Hosseini redefines family not as a fixed biological unit but as an evolving emotional and ethical space shaped by memory and absence. Through its intergenerational and transnational narratives, *And the Mountains Echoed* highlights the lasting impact of separation on identity formation, emphasizing how familial bonds persist as emotional echoes that continue to define the self in a globalized world.

Keywords: Family Separation, Identity Formation, Cultural Memory, Diaspora, Intergenerational Trauma.

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Family occupies a central yet fragile position in Khaled Hosseini's *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013), a novel structured around separation, displacement, and emotional inheritance. Unlike Hosseini's earlier works that foreground national trauma through singular protagonists, this novel adopts a polyphonic narrative that traverses continents and generations. At its core lies the traumatic separation of siblings Abdullah and Pari, an event that reverberates across the lives of multiple characters. This paper argues that Hosseini represents family separation not as an isolated personal tragedy but as a formative force that shapes identity, memory, and belonging across transnational spaces. Drawing upon theories of cultural memory, trauma, and diaspora, the study examines how broken familial bonds generate enduring emotional echoes that redefine kinship and selfhood. Through fragmented storytelling and interwoven narratives, *And the Mountains Echoed* demonstrates how identity emerges from absence as much as from presence, revealing family as an evolving emotional construct shaped by loss, silence, and remembrance.

The novel opens with a folktale-like parable of a father forced to surrender his child, immediately foregrounding separation as a primal wound. This story prefigures the central rupture between Abdullah and Pari, whose bond is defined by deep emotional intimacy. Abdullah recalls, "In the long run, it was the things you didn't say that weighed on you the most" (*ATME* 55). This silence becomes emblematic of the trauma that shapes both siblings' lives.

Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma emphasizes that traumatic experiences are not fully assimilated at the moment of occurrence but resurface through delayed emotional responses (Caruth 4). Abdullah's lingering grief and Pari's inexplicable sense of loss exemplify this belatedness. Though Pari grows up materially secure in France, she carries an emotional void she cannot name: "She felt that something was missing, something vital" (*ATME* 249). Separation thus becomes a psychological inheritance that transcends memory and geography.

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Hosseini's use of multiple narrators and disjointed timelines reflects the fragmented identities of his characters. Stuart Hall argues that identity is "a production, which is never complete, always in process" (Hall 222). In *And the Mountains Echoed*, identity is continually reshaped by migration, silence, and emotional displacement.

Characters such as Nabi and Nila Wahdati embody hybrid identities shaped by cultural dislocation. Nabi's internal conflict torn between loyalty and guilt reveals how separation fractures moral selfhood. He confesses, "I have been a coward, hiding behind silence" (*ATME* 131). His failure to speak becomes a form of ethical paralysis, reinforcing how silence sustains emotional estrangement. The novel suggests that identity is not solely self-fashioned but relational, emerging through bonds that persist even when physically severed.

Cultural memory functions as a connective tissue linking past and present in the novel. Jan Assmann defines cultural memory as a collective process through which societies transmit meaning across generations (Assmann 36). In *And the Mountains Echoed*, memory operates unevenly, preserved through stories, letters, and emotional residues rather than direct knowledge.

Pari's gradual discovery of her origins highlights how memory can be reconstructed through narrative fragments. When she learns of Abdullah, she reflects, "I have lived with a shadow all my life, and now I know its shape" (*ATME* 292). This moment illustrates how identity is retrospectively reconfigured through recovered memory. The novel thus portrays remembrance as an ethical act, restoring silenced relationships and reasserting emotional truths erased by circumstance.

Migration in *And the Mountains Echoed* complicates traditional notions of home and family. Characters inhabit transnational spaces that fracture but also redefine belonging. Robin Cohen notes that diasporic identities are characterized by "a tension between loss and hope" (Cohen 26). Pari's life in France exemplifies this tension, as comfort coexists with emotional estrangement.

Abdullah, who remains in Afghanistan, experiences rooted displacement a sense of loss without physical movement. His longing underscores that separation, not migration alone, produces diasporic consciousness. Hosseini writes, "He had stayed behind, but the world had moved on without him" (*ATME* 201). By juxtaposing stationary and mobile forms of displacement, the novel expands diaspora beyond geography to include emotional exile. Silence emerges as a recurring motif that sustains broken bonds. Michel Foucault argues that silence is not merely the absence of speech but a strategic element of power (Foucault 27). Nabi's silence regarding Pari's true identity perpetuates emotional injustice, even as it protects material stability.

Nila Wahdati's reflections on motherhood further complicate the ethics of separation. She admits, "Love does not always arrive wrapped in kindness" (*ATME* 164). This ambivalence challenges sentimental notions of parental sacrifice, revealing the moral ambiguities underpinning familial decisions. Hosseini ultimately critiques silence as a corrosive force that erodes ethical responsibility and emotional connection.

Despite irreversible separations, the novel insists on the persistence of emotional bonds. Late reunions and surrogate relationships suggest alternative forms of kinship grounded in care rather than blood. Judith Butler argues that kinship can be reimagined beyond normative family structures (Butler 102). Pari's bond with her adoptive family and Abdullah's relationship with his daughter demonstrate adaptive forms of belonging. The novel closes with a sense of partial healing, emphasizing that while broken bonds cannot be restored fully, their echoes can foster empathy and ethical awareness.

The Afghan landscape in *And the Mountains Echoed* functions as more than a backdrop; it operates as a repository of memory and emotional resonance. The mountains themselves symbolize endurance and continuity, standing in contrast to the fractured human relationships that unfold beneath them. Early in the novel, Abdullah associates the land with emotional security, observing that "the land remembered what people tried to forget" (*ATME* 28). This notion of landscape as memory aligns with theories of eco-memory, which suggest that physical spaces retain traces of human experience. The separation of siblings coincides with geographic dislocation, reinforcing the idea that identity is spatially anchored. As characters migrate to urban and foreign spaces, their emotional detachment intensifies, suggesting that displacement disrupts not only social bonds but also ecological belonging. This reinforces the seminar's focus on text-context relationships, where narrative meaning emerges through spatial and cultural environments.

One of the most distinctive features of *And the Mountains Echoed* is its deliberate use of intertextual storytelling. This opening parable functions as a foundational intertext that frames the novel's exploration of sacrifice, loss, and moral ambiguity. The folktale is not merely ornamental; rather, it establishes a narrative grammar through which subsequent stories are interpreted. The father's decision to surrender his child in exchange for prosperity anticipates the ethical dilemma faced by Saboor when he gives Pari away. As Hosseini writes, "The father's love was divided by necessity, not absence" (*ATME* 9). This intertextual layering underscores how stories transmit ethical codes across generations.

Julia Kristeva's assertion that texts exist in dialogue with other texts is particularly relevant here. She notes that "every narrative is an absorption and transformation of another" (Kristeva 37). Hosseini's reworking of folkloric structures within a modern realist framework illustrates how ancient narrative patterns continue to shape contemporary understandings of family and sacrifice. The intertextual opening thus situates personal trauma within a broader cultural and ethical continuum.

And the Mountains Echoed presents family separation as a defining force in identity formation, one that generates enduring emotional and cultural echoes across generations and borders. Through fragmented narratives, cultural memory, and transnational perspectives, Hosseini reimagines family as an ethical space shaped by absence, silence, and remembrance. The novel affirms that while separation fractures lives, the echoes of familial bonds continue to shape the self, transforming loss into a site of relational meaning. In doing so, Hosseini situates personal suffering within a broader global context, reinforcing the relevance of family, memory, and identity in contemporary world literature.

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