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SUBALTERNITY IN KHALED HOSSEINI'S *AND THE MOUNTAINS ECHOED*

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ABSTRACT

Khaled Hosseini's novel, "And the Mountains Echoed" (2013) is set in and embodies both Afghanistan and the society beyond, within which fictional characters' journeys are determined by the land's financial instability and unstable social condition. The characters' development intersects and reveals a lot about the country's social, political, and historical complexity which contributes to the prominence of binary; the voiced and the voiceless. The term "Subaltern" is applied to the voiceless and subjugated class, a key component in South Asian literature. This paper tries to analyze how as a diasporic writer Khaled Hosseini tries to become the spokesperson of the marginal section but in the process starts speaking for himself; a problematic positionality according to Spivak.

Keywords: Subaltern, Gender, Hegemony, Marginalization, Agency

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Subalternity in *And the Mountains Echoed*

"So, then, You want a story and I will tell you one" (Hosseini, p.1) starts Khaled Hosseini's novel 'And the Mountains Echoed'. It is 1952 in the remote village of Shadbag, Afghanistan and a father exhausted by the task of survival narrates a bedtime story to his children: Abdullah and Pari. The tale is about a demon (Div) that forces a father into making a heartbreaking decision. The father can gift his son a better life by giving away his son permanently to the Demon, or keep his son in the family and suffer the same poverty-stricken life that he and his large family led. Hosseini tries to bring through this tale the voice of both the deprived and the dominant. The father, his family, and his community are in a state of subalternity from where their voices cannot be heard. Their emotions and feelings are overshadowed and hegemonized by the elite voice which in the story can be the demon, a metaphor in the sense of irony. Subaltern's interest and emotion are sidelined and they are made to accept and be convinced of the course that the elite represents for the deprived ones. Hegemony is the mode of exercising 'non-coercive authority' which according to Italian intellectual Antonio Francesco Gramsci (1891-1937) is that, within a society, the ruling class mostly asserts its authority by convincing the entire population that the interest of the ruling class is the interest of the entire population. The manners in which hegemony is applied, as mentioned by Meenakshi Gigi Durham, Douglas and M. Kellner in their work, 'History of Subaltern Classes' says, "That the supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as 'domination' and as 'intellectual and moral leadership'" (p. 34). This manner of subjugation and hegemony is applied in the bedtime story that the father tells his children. The demon seizes young kids from the villagers because of his might and supremacy which none could challenge. The demon with his intellectual

power convinces the deprived father that his action of snatching children is morally justified. The demon convinces that he is in a better position to provide a better future for the children.

The act of being an agent to the subaltern is mostly borderline with personal motives. This process can be seen in chapter six of the text. The chapter is dedicated to Mme. NilaWahdati, the rich elite women who adopted Pari and is renowned to some extent because of her startling frankness and lustrous poetry. The understanding of the character may lead readers to blame her for her extreme carefree life, defying all cultural obligations, but when she was asked as to why she left Afghanistan, she blames the Islamic laws, the community, and the mindset of people for restricting women. She said. "... imagine, monsieur Boustouler, a woman in Afghanistan arrested for wearing burqa!..." (p.206) she asserted that she left Afghanistan to save her daughter. She stated:

I didn't want her turned, against her will and nature, into one of those diligent, sad women who are bent on a lifelong course of quiet servitude, forever in fear of showing, saying, or doing the wrong thing... I didn't want this for my daughter." (p. 207-208).

Part the adopted daughter is used by Nila to prove to the world that she is a modern loving and caring mother, although the fact of her being a good mother is remotely true when one assesses Pari's narration about her mother.

Politically, the Gramscian concept of subalternity directs to groups who have no autonomous political power, and thus, the work about the concept of subalternity has centered on a population who are politically, socially, and geographically beyond the hegemonic power structure. Many of the characters in Hosseini's novel, *And the Mountains Echoed*, concentrate on the first-person narrative of people who are socially, economically, and geographically strongly influenced and convinced by the hegemonic power of the set society. His work focuses on cultural hegemony, which identified the groups that are excluded from a society's established institutions which denied the means of people to voice out in their society. Gramsci suggests that hegemony comes from below and it originates in the thoughts, beliefs, and actions of everyday people who may or may not see themselves as part of organized groups. Thus, Gramscian focus is on the history of organized groups and their organized struggle. Hence, the understanding of the subaltern cannot happen without the complete identification of the self or individual.

Gramsci's views as expressed in his book "The Prison Notebooks" inspired south Asian historians led by Ranjit Guha as the 'Collective' or 'Subaltern Studies group' in the 1980s to further develop it. The retaking of history from a different perspective: 'history from below' model which outlines his manifesto in "Subaltern Studies I" and later in his other works focused on their anti-essentialist approach, redefining what happens among the base levels of society than among the elite. To Guha subaltern is a negative space or position of disempowerment, social or political agency, or a position without identity. Thus he pronounced, subaltern as "appositionally related to the elite" This position or space could be identified in the text '*And the Mountains Echoed*'. Saboor is forced to give his daughter for adoption to a wealthy house in Kabul. The storytelling before the heartbreaking act seems to be the only choice and convincing method left for the poor father against the hard life he lived. "A finger had to be cut, to save the hand." (p.6) This sentence summarizes the unavoidable choice. The act of giving away the child for a perceived better life as instilled by the modern world upon the remote villagers is an act of elite hegemony towards the subaltern. On one hand, by playing with the emotion of these tribal or the remotely located villagers, child trafficking has been at height especially in the economically deprived and war-ravaged areas and on the other hand working with the voices of the agency has always scarred the subalterns for life. The adoption of Pari was to fill the void that the rich women (Mrs. Wahdit) felt in their life. A solution that proved temporary for the rich women and a lifelong feeling of alienation for the adopted girl. The attempt to give voice and agency to the deprived class has always been seen as a hegemonic act in different forms. This hegemony of the elite could be referred through the lines uttered by the Div in the story, "you find that cruelty and benevolence are but shades of the same colour." (p.14) The narrative is also developed with real-time experience of the author himself. He heard stories of

children dying out of hunger and cold in the remote mountain villages of Afghanistan when he visited the place as an ambassador of the United Nation refugee group to Afghanistan in 2007.

This act presented in the first chapter, like a pebble thrown into a pool of water, creates countless ripples that reflect a similar tone and shades. At the outset it appears, a tale of a brother and sister forced into separation and who would ultimately be reunited in a happy ending, but instead it presents an intricacy of multilayered events. The suffering and pain of one character echo in the life of others irrespective of their place. Thus the title, "And the mountains echoed"

The depiction of western culture as a symbol of modernity is evident in the text. The plot in "And the Mountains Echoed" takes place in numerous countries at various points in time. The characters differ from one another in nearly every way but the most obvious kind of difference is the economic status: some wealthy and others struggling to survive. The tag of being an Afghan immigrant from the 'West' is depicted as superior to the natives or the Afghans who came back from the 'non-west' country. Two families return after the end of the war: One from the US and the other from Pakistan. The western family, Idris and Timure not only present their superiority but gain more wealth and respect from Afghanistan. As was the feeling of Idris, "Idris is struck again by how easily the locals can tell he is a westernized Afghan, how the whiff of money and power affords him unwarranted privilege in this city." (p.173) On the other hand, the Pakistan return, Iqbal and his family suffers rejection lose their land to a warlord and finally branded as terrorist. Iqbal the rightful owner and native of the land is the subaltern who is twice victimized with the elite's exploitation of his condition, and then in the elite's rewriting of subaltern's subjectivity as a dependent object.

The text presents the mechanism of power and wealth over people's relationships in two ways: they serve to bring people closer or breaks them further into isolation. Wealth as a barrier between different kinds of people is seen when Mr.Wahdati spends money to build a wall separating his family from the rest of the city. Similarly for Idris, an Afghan immigrant to the United States often comments on his children's lack of interest in understanding their native land because of the luxurious lifestyle they are provided in the United States. Idris himself ignores the promise of helping Roshie as he is clouded by his selfish greed over the wealth. He said, "He recognizes the fierce determination that had seized him for what it was, an illusion, a mirage." (p.193) Idris seizes to be as a subaltern agency once the interest of the subaltern comes into conflict with his interest. On the other hand, wealth is also used for real help. Idris's cousin, Timur, arranges for Roshie's operation using his wealth. There are many other instances of powerful, elite characters using their power to help others: Nabi provides his house for free to the foreign doctors who are there to aid the victims. Power and wealth, like the interconnectedness, are portrayed as "neutral multipliers." Indeed, the interconnectedness as one of the prominent themes in 'And the Mountains Echoed' could not be presented without capital and power enabling it. Thus, Hosseini presents the inequality in the treatment of humans because of the incredible inequality between the rich and the poor.

For instance, the driver (Nabi) from the town is seen as superior to the rest of his people in the village because of the location and modern lifestyle that he has witnessed. The reality of the driver as a servant with no freedom of his own is never considered when considering superiority. Subaltern is formed through the subaltern's relation with the elite, or in Hegelian expression, "the slave is a slave only when she has a master." (Krupa, p.7) Similarly, the Afghans who fled the war towards the west carry the superiority feeling over the real native who held their ground even in the time of chaos. The position seems to be because of the financial capacity one possesses, but then though not explicitly discussed, there are traces from where a reader could assess that financial capacity is not only the dividing or driving force between the two positions. Saboor denies financial assistance from his brother-in-law though they need the money. Here we see the masculinity of Saboor as the male provider of the family being challenged and thus reject the help. So to this effect, the reflection of the afghan condition and the emotional trauma in the fictional work seems to be one-sided. The author as an agency of the subaltern is judging the condition of the character concerning the western definition of happiness and materialism wherein the savior always ends up being raised in the West or someone coming from the West. In the text the improvised villagers are rescued with the support of the city people, Nila a modern woman is rescued from her suffocating surroundings by western free culture and the

little girl Roshni who was disfigured from her uncle's brutal attack saved by non-residential Afghan known as Timur. Most of these people, who aided the affected Afghan, in reality, had other hidden motives for them being there. The two brothers, Idris and Timur fled Afghanistan with their parents when the Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan. They were then just thirteen years old. After spending a year in Pakistan they moved to California for two decades. They return not to re-settle but as they say:

"reconnect," to "educate" themselves, "bear witness" to the aftermath of all these years of war and destruction. They want to go back to states, to raise awareness, and fund, to "give back." (p.155)

The reality for their brief return was more of a materialistic purpose. They wanted to reclaim their father's old property because its value was skyrocketing with the coming of thousands of foreign aid workers. Similarly, the plastic surgeon Dr. Markos from a small town called Tinos in Greece is there in Kabul mainly because he wanted to get out of his small town and live a life away from the guidance and dictation of his mother. He describes his mother:

The demands, the obligations she saddles you with. The way she uses these acts as currency, with which she barter for loyalty and allegiance...the rope that pulls you from the flood can become a noose around your neck. (p.345-346).

This feeling of Markos led him to say, "I have denied her, taking care to keep an ocean, a continent- or, preferably, both- between us for the better part of three decades?" (p. 346)

Subaltern a dumb subject in Gayatri Spivak's work "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) affected scholars in numerous fields. Scholars in postcolonial studies have attempted to revive the subaltern and fill her with voice. Vital to Spivak's case is the dominance of narrative as a means of subsuming subaltern agency. More particularly, she argues:

Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the "third world woman" caught between tradition and modernization. (Spivak "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 306)

Mrs. NilaWahdati, Madeline, Pari, Mascoma, Parwana, and Roshni: all female characters in the text are influenced or stuck between the world of patriarchy and imperialism. The life of Mrs. Nila fits perfectly in Spivak's description for in the end, she fails to live her natural course of life with satisfaction. The building of the character seems directed against the stern subjugation of women in an Islamic based state. Nila emerges as a character that lives life openly and with no bondage, proving to be negligent, placing her romantic life and poetry over her husband and daughter. She is in awful need of attention and failing to achieve it, commits suicide. In the end, caught between the modern and the tradition, a woman loses here stand even when she takes the role of a radical feminist. The death of the two differently placed women: Nila and Madeline, portrayed as selfish and ready to do away with the prescribed norms of a woman finds little place in the text. Their death was easily accepted by the loved ones because of the rebellious life they led. Madeline's death was never known by her surviving daughter and Markos too never attempted to inform the passing to her daughter. A woman, who dares to leave her daughter for the pursuit of a career and later completely ignore her existence, portrays a woman without heart. She is ready to fall into relation with any man who promises fame despite being physically violent. All this drawing of the picture is the voice of the narrator and not the woman. Her voice is never fully presented and whatever is extracted from the narrator presents the voice of the Patriarchy.

The narrative of subalternity is always digressed by the patriarchic, imperialistic, and nationalistic power, which claims to both represent and re-present the subaltern subject. Rosalind Morris offers an alternative vision of the subaltern agency through a close study of narrative voice.

While the work of the Subaltern Studies collective has been very significant in (re)writing history from below, their analyses have focused primarily on the subaltern consciousness that is being

represented. Although who is being represented (in terms of the subject as a narrative construction) is closely tied to who purports to represent her (in terms of the subject as a political being), the interconnection between the two is largely obscured in the work of the subaltern studies collective, which has focused largely on the representation of the subaltern alone without taking into account the narrative voice that structures subalternity. (as cited in Krupa Shandilya, 2014, p.1)

Subaltern Studies collective focused more on historical records and ethnography, which do not lend to the analysis of narrative voice. This is the opposite of what is seen in the novel. *And The Mountains Echoed* by Hosseini. Here the re-presentation of the underprivileged are made through different narrative, but within it, the domination of the elite and their motives overpower the voices of the subaltern. The sense of representation in the text is more to do with the artistic rendition and less of politics.

Fiction helps the reader engage with the multiple narrative voices through which narrative voice structures subalternity. Further, literature is self-acknowledging in the process of narration. If the subaltern cannot write and represent itself, the endeavour to write subaltern subjectivity would always be an imagined picture. Krupa Shandilya in her work said:

Literature allows us to read subaltern agency in the interstices of narrative voices that purport to re-present/represent her. In other words, it is in the gaps, silences, and caesuras of the elite narration of subalternity that we may find a subaltern agency. (p.3)

"And the mountains echoed" consist of nine chapters with multiple narrations from a different point of view. Starting with first-person narration, the reader encounters a whole chapter (chapter four) in the form of epistolary. Numerous others are narrated in the third person limited omniscient perspective. Hosseini uses the present tense, instead of the more common past tense in dealing with the narration. Since the subaltern agency is reliant on the narrative voice to re-present her. The shifting narrative voice of the text, allows readers to see subaltern agency through a range of narrative techniques. The third chapter in the text is about the twin sisters, Parwana and Masooma. Parwana abandons her sister in the desert and heads for her future, a future free from the responsibility and obligation of taking care of a paralyzed twin. This is narrated through a third-person omniscient, narrates Parwana's interiority such that there is a clear alignment between the elite narrator and the elite narratorial voice.

The only way to know for sure is to go back the way she had come and Parwana begins to do just that: she turns around and takes a few steps in Masooma's direction. Then she stops. Masooma was right. If she goes back now, she will not have the courage to do it when the sun rises. She will lose heart and end up staying. She will stay forever. This is her only chance. (p. 80)

The narrative voice starts as the third-person omniscient narration and moves in and out of Parwana's subjectivity. In doing so, it draws attention to the constructed nature of this narrative, enabling us to see Masooma as Parwana sees her— as an object of burden, unwanted bondage, and a barrier to living a normal life.

The understanding of agency in terms of speech and silence as a lack of agency is argued upon by scholars. Speech as an agency invokes a self-originating presence. If this perspective is true then, silence should be the subaltern's mode of agency. Thus, the characters' speech-less-ness is not an indication of their lack of agency but rather the inability of the elite narrator to understand them. This suggests Masooma's subjectivity as not merely constructed in opposition to the elite, but independent of elite definitions, and thus can only be rendered in indirect speech. If the speech-less-ness signifies subaltern's agency then body gesture and immobility could be another form of agency that is un-recognizable to the elite perspective. Further, the name "Masooma" is in itself significant. In Collins dictionary, the word means, " Muslim Girl name and it is an Urdu originated name with multiple meanings: Innocent, sinless, safe-guarded, Protected." Her name suggests her marginal position between class definitions: she is the subaltern who acts without speech. Masooma throughout the narration never comes to understand that her sister has always envied and hated her presence. Her decision to commit suicide to relieve her sister from the sisterhood bondage is but made

without the knowledge that her disability was because of the cruelty and planned action of her sister. The care Masooma received is but the kindness forced upon by Parwana to redeem her of the guilt. Masooma's innocence is thus taken advantage of by her twin sister.

The distinction made in Spivak's essay on the literal and figural subaltern identifies the literal subaltern as one who is systematically deprived of voice due to her economic and political condition and so cannot speak. Contrary to it, the figural subaltern speaks but she cannot be heard. The distinction, when applied to Hosseini's characters in the text, points to the presence of both, the figural and the literal subaltern. Most of the characters are figural because they speak, but their voices are ignored or unheard of by the elite. The presentation of the subaltern depends on its agency and the representation of the subaltern's story establishes her position as a subaltern. Pointing to a character as subaltern throughout the text is difficult because of the narrative and the development of the character. The shift in the position of a character from subaltern to elite or vice versa is visible in almost all characters. Mr. SulamaWahdati the adopted father of Pari marries Mrs. Nila out of social pressure. When it comes to gender identification, he turns subaltern in a society that identifies only two gender distinction: male and female. He is a respected rich man in an Islamic society but is also secretly homosexual. The narrative fails to provide a voice for the character. Mr. Wahdati as homosexual is never discussed to length in the text and he as a character fails to express and live a life following his desired gender. Nabi the servant and Mrs. Nila treat Mr. Wahdati as the figural subaltern, one who presumably speaks but whose voice they willfully do not hear. Ranjit Guha in his, *On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India*, said;

The same class or element which was dominant in one area . . . could be among the dominated in another. This could and did create many ambiguities and contradictions in attitudes and alliances, especially among the lowest strata of the rural gentry, impoverished landlords, rich peasants, and upper-middle-class peasants all of whom belonged, ideally speaking, to the category of people or subaltern classes. (1982. P. 8)

Spivak argues that direct access to subaltern voice as attempted by Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze is doomed to fail. It is not because the subaltern cannot utter words or construct sentences. The subaltern "cannot speak," as her voice is deprived of authorized, political speech. Her message gets interrupted from being conveyed, socially, and politically. Her inaccessibility to institutionally validated language and the European theorist's sense of assuming what is good for the subalterns and what she will say becomes the hindrance for the subalterns' utterance. These seeming acts of benevolence by the white male are but acts of violence. European and American academics ignoring the possibility, that their idea of saving may not be what the third world women want, and thus the West act of saving further silences the subaltern. Spivak's statement questions the future civilizing missions: is this really about saving women? Or is it about a superpower further consolidating its power, and denying others speech? The statement of elite saving the subaltern from their deprived condition is laid all over the text by Hosseini in his text. Pari seemed saved by the elite from the uncertain future that her real father could provide. Mrs. Nila felt safe from the Islamic confinement by western culture and attitude. Rohi the young girl in the hospital is saved by Timur who finances her operation and later helps her with education and book publication. Spivak accepts the presence of women's oppression all around the world but she denies the assertion and right of "civilizing" or colonizing projects to rescue and free women from their oppression. In the "And the Mountains echoed" all female characters are oppressed mentally or physically, or in some cases both. It seems at first justifiable for the elite and the west to rescue them from their suffering, but in doing so these female characters are either silenced or are made to speak the language of the savior. These women throughout their life suffer mentally because of their detachment from their roots. They fall into confusion, anxiety, and longed to understand their own identity.

Conclusion

Thus Hosseini as an Afghan diasporic author tries to represent the voice of the deprived and the subaltern section of Afghanistan but in doing so, he too could not escape the hegemonic clutches of the West.

The novel in some way depicts his effort through the 'Hosseini Foundation' which he spearheaded for the relocation of the Afghan refugees. The narrator in the text as an agency to the subaltern becomes the white man saving the brown women. Hosseini as a third world writer is humanized by metropolitan mediations. Aijaz Ahmad in his book, *In Theory- Nation, Classes, Literature* under the chapter Literary Theory and 'Third World Literature' mentions:

By the time a Latin American novel arrives in Delhi, it has been selected, translated, published, reviewed, explicated, and allotted a place in the burgeoning archive of "third world literature" through a complex set of metropolitan mediations. (2000, p. 45)

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