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EXPLORING CHILDHOOD VULNERABILITY IN KHALED HOSSEINI'S *AND THE MOUNTAINS ECHOED*

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Abstract: In the prevalent discourses of vulnerability studies, childhood vulnerability forms a unique and engaging field of study. Khaled Hosseini's *And The Mountains Echoed* (2013) poignantly portrays the entanglements created by cruel experiences during childhood and posits the stage of childhood as highly susceptible to vulnerability. Childhood vulnerability is an intricate idea that ranges from individual circumstances of children to systemic exploitation in society. It also creates a site of shared precarity. Vulnerability in childhood takes its tangible forms in economic hardships, familial dislocation, gender stereotypes, trauma, etcetera. It leads to unequal distribution of opportunity among children and renders a child's life as a mere superfluous body causing mental and physical deformities to the child. Furthermore, this paper, through various episodes of the novel, will embark on a journey to express the idea of false resilience and its implications on children's psyche. To inculcate a culture of empathy and peace in our conflict-ridden world, a holistic analysis of vulnerability as a shared human condition is crucial.

Keywords: Childhood vulnerability, systemic exploitation, shared precarity, deformities, false resilience

Introduction

Khaled Hosseini is an Afghan-born American novelist who is emerging as one of the finest writers of the 21st century. He spent most of his childhood in Afghanistan but his family moved to the United States due to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. He was a doctor when he began his writing journey. His writings and themes of his novels are inspired mostly by his own experiences. *And The Mountains Echoed (2013)* is his third novel. It narrates the story of separation and longingness through the story of a brother, Abdullah and his sister, Pari. It spans across multiple generations through delicate character development. Hosseini encountered two young sisters in Kabul in 2009 when he visited there as a member of a refugee agency. Hosseini observed that the older sister cared for the younger one as a maternal figure and faced many hardships to survive in the harsh political environment of Afghanistan. This incident led Hosseini to write about the strong bond of siblings in his novel, *And The Mountains Echoed (2013)*.

Vulnerability comes from the Latin word *vulnus*, meaning ‘wound’. It is simply the state of being exposed to injury or harm either physically or emotionally. It can exhibit in different forms and scenarios. For instance, vulnerability is a part of our existence in our human bodies as our bodies are prone to injuries. This indicates the intrinsic nature of vulnerability. In another case, we are social beings; we live-in a rooted structure of hierarchy and power as a family, as a community, as a nation or the whole world at large. This system of existence leads to diversified contexts of vulnerability like economic vulnerability due to lack of access to basic needs or social vulnerability that comes from belonging to a particular race or ethnic group. Moreover, humans share vulnerability because social identity, congeniality, norms and cultural practices mandate our existence. In literature, vulnerability is mostly viewed from the angles of human fragility, precarity and resilience.

Child vulnerability is a subset of vulnerability as a whole. It involves a child’s heightened susceptibility to harm, exploitation or neglect shaped by systemic institutionalization. Vulnerability in children is not an inherent trait but rather a condition shaped by various factors including environment, social circumstances and individual capacities. They are being denied the basic access to food, healthcare, education, etc. Children are also affected by dislocation. The disruption of their homes, communities and support system due to conflicts, war and violence sets them more vulnerable to many physical and mental deformities and loss of identity. Children have limited capacity to protect themselves. Their dependence on adult’s care makes them more vulnerable when those adults are unable to protect them. It makes them doubly vulnerable. Children are heavily influenced by the circumstances and the environment in which they live in. The socio-economic context is beyond the mere lack of income. It encompasses systemic inequalities in access to healthcare, education and discrimination based on caste, ethnicity, religion, etcetera. Climate change and environmental degradation also play a significant role leading to scarcity and displacement. Cultural constructs like child marriage, gender inequality, and abuses hugely contribute to children vulnerability.

Analysis of childhood vulnerability

In this paper, childhood vulnerability will be reimagined from various perspectives. The focus will be on rooting out the concealed veins of vulnerability that run across the characters’ childhood journeys in the novel.

Systemic exploitation is a form of injustice deeply rooted within the socio-economic and political system of the society. According to Iris Marion Young’s seminal work, *Justice and The Politics of Difference (1990)* systemic exploitation is identified as one of the “five faces of oppression”. She argued that exploitation is structural, resulting from the “unconscious processes” of social institutions rather than the conscious intent of individual actors. Children are the foremost victims in any trajectory of chaos all over the world. Children are often rendered to a state of helplessness. The extreme situations in their lives create a space for more helplessness. The novel, *And The Mountains Echoed (2013)* by Khaled Hosseini has all the ingredients to study the subject matter. Hosseini intricately crafts his characters through different narrators and different timelines to reveal how children are affected by the systemic exploitation; how the wounds stay throughout

their lives, affecting the lives of others around them as well. Saboor is an impoverished farmer who faces extreme poverty. He sells his little daughter, Pari to a wealthy family of Wahditi with the hope of ensuring the survival of his remaining family. Pari, being only 3 years old, cannot do anything for the choice her father made for her. She might have led a luxurious life but no child would have wanted such a separation. Abdullah, her brother, can sense the situation but there is nothing much a ten-year old could possibly do against a determined father. However, he is old enough to be impacted by the circumstances. The act of his father remains deep in his heart unforgiving. There is also a case of gender stereotyping on choosing Pari among his children. Saboor seems to believe that Pari, being a girl, cannot survive their poverty.

Roshi's life is caught in the trap set by adults. She is the sole survivor of the brutal massacre caused by her uncle over a property dispute with her family. Dr. Idris Bashiri thinks about human vulnerability and indifferences in society while observing Roshi in her hospital bed. This moment was captured by Hosseini in the novel as: "In her smile, Idris sees how little of the world he has known, even at thirty-five years of age, its savageness, its cruelty, the boundless brutality". (Hosseini 174)

Adel believes his father to be a good man but on meeting Gholam, the son of Iqbal (Abdullah's half-brother), he realizes that his father is not whom he has envisioned to be. Adel's father has taken hold of Gholam's property while they are away taking refugees to Pakistan. The escalating violence and the instability created by Soviet Invasion (1979-1989) and the subsequent war cause extreme poverty. Having little means of survival in a war-torn country, his family has to dislocate themselves to a new country. On their return, their land has been taken away without their knowledge. The paperwork taken to court is eventually claimed to be burnt by their lawyer at the expense of getting a new expensive watch. Gholam and his family has to face such predicaments because of the systemic failure. Gholam's childhood is rather shocking as he experiences the horrible existence of the needy people from a young age and the corrupt nature of the adults. Children grow looking up to adults in their lives. It shapes directly or indirectly on who they become later on in their lives. The children are often robbed of their innocence.

Children are more prone to lasting injuries- the physical as well as mental deformities. An individual is shaped by the memory of events taking place in early phase of life. Endel Tulving, an influential cognitive neuroscientist defined memory as mental time travel, a unique process of human consciously re-experiencing past events. Any structural institution might try to eliminate such happenings over the course of time as a form of normalization. However, it always resurfaces after many years of internalisation and suppression as it is archived through memory.

Abdullah, after the separation with his sister, was heartbroken. He retained her sister in his memory by safeguarding the possessions of his sister and by naming his daughter with the same name, 'Pari'. He archived it so well that his daughter began to feel a presence of her aunt from the stories her father had told her. Despite his failed memory, he had succeeded in instilling his daughter with so much of resilience in her life. Roshi recalled her past traumatic events by transferring her personal agony into a book and made a permanent documentation of her sufferings. Likewise, the act of kindness amidst the brutality of her life was also penned down. Her book was dedicated to both Amra Ademovic, the nurse who adopted her and Timur Bashiri who funded her life-saving surgery. She remembered Idris for giving her fond illusion with regard to her surgery as he failed to keep his promises.

Memory had abandoned Pari of her early life in Shadbagh. Nevertheless, she felt an absence lurking around her life. The lack of certain affection had placed her into a mirage of her own identity. It might be a faint memory but the response to this situation had formed a connection of belongingness somewhere unknown. This void might have remained a mere illusion had her mother Nali Wahditi not expressed about her life in an interview for a magazine. Her step uncle Nabi, after many years of concealing the truth and guilt, wrote a letter for his niece, Pari. Being the root cause of the sibling's separation, he is seeking redemption through his lengthy letter to Markois Varvaris. Every adult has their own hidden agenda in their moves. Nabi facilitated Pari's adoption to the Wahditi to win the favour of Nila Wahditi as he had a secret liking of her. The choice came with the deepest regret in his life. This truth could be removed from his life although his niece would not have a chance to find it out. His actions bounced back as a form of echoes to his life. His conscious mind could not annihilate his acts. It is well archived through his own redemption.

Markois Varvaris repaired the faces of the war victims like Roshni as the form of archiving the human body by attempting to mend and preserve what violence had tried to annihilate. He saved children from merely rendering their lives to a superfluous body. It shows how trauma in a single day reverberates across generations and continues from the mountains of Afghanistan to the streets of Paris and California. War criminals had reformed Shadbagh into Shadbagh e-Nau, which is the monument of corruption that attempts to bury the history of those who have lived there before. Even if they tried to bury their corruptness, the presence of Gholam and Iqbal prevented the annihilation of the hidden systemic scenarios.

According to Soraya Chemaly's *The Resilience Myth: New Thinking on Grit, Strength, and Growth After Trauma* (2024), the definition of resilience is a 'myth' as it concentrates almost entirely on individual grit and mental toughness making it as a personal trait. Society shifts the burden of systemic failure onto the victims. According to her view, resilience is an ideal that can ultimately only be achieved through brutality. She argues that self-sufficiency is a pernicious fiction where true strength is found in the interdependence and collective care. It enforces us of the importance of shared precarity. The characters in the novel pose a hollow strength. They convince themselves that they have moved on but they have only buried their trauma in a way that eventually collapses. In the beginning of the novel, Saboor narrates a fable. The *div* gives Baba Ayub a potion to forget his son as an act of mercy but he is haunted by the vague and persistent grief that he cannot name. It suggests that annihilated memory is a fragile lie. The trauma remains trapped in the soul even after the mind removes it. One may forget a certain memory but one cannot forget what they felt. Saboor after selling his daughter to the Wahditi family showed a mountain of resilience by reasoning himself that it was a choice to make Pari's life more comfortable. Eventually, his relationship with his family deteriorated displaying internal decay. He cut down the tree which served as a symbol for hope and magic for firewood. The guilt and the reverence of the family bond is highlighted vividly in the novel. Nila Wahditi committed suicide after many years of coping up with many situations in her life. The extreme control of her dominant, abusive father had marked an onset of her tragedy. The absence of her mother at the early stage of her life created a feeling of existential estrangement. She had an abortion which subsequently left her unable to bear children during her youth before marriage. She grew up lonely and to escape her father's oppressive control, he married Suleiman Wahditi. However, marriage was not in her favour rather she fell into the bottomless pit of agony. She found out that her husband was in love with their man servant. She was deprived of affection that she longed for throughout her life. But, she decided to leave her husband when he had a stroke. She finally left all the restrictions and pent-up emotions behind and went to Paris with her adopted daughter. Her internal wounds could not be easily mended with the presence of her adopted daughter. Nila was simply displaying an act to maintain her public image. Parwana's (the second wife of Saboor) care about her paralyzed sister Masooma is not a pure, selfless form of love. It was based on the heavy emotional burden of her secret. The intense jealousy in Parwana compelled her to commit a mistake that lasted a lifetime. On learning that her sister Masooma was about to marry Saboor whom she had a secret affection, Parwana caused her sister to fall from a tree breaking her spine and made her paralyzed.

Pari (Abdullah's daughter) built her resilience through profound self-sacrifice and a borrowed identity. She was under the burden of her own identity as she tried to heal her father's unresolved wounds. She was named after her aunt Pari. She saw her aunt Pari in the mirror while brushing her teeth. She was desperate in finding her aunt, yet she was trapped in the vicious cycle of self-sacrifice which eventually led her to give up her dream of going to art school. There came a moment of exhaustion from the circumstances of her life. People viewed her devotion as a sign of strength. But, she deeply knew, "It was the kind of love that, sooner or later, cornered you into a choice: either you tore free or you stayed and withstood its rigour even as it squeezed you into something smaller than yourself." (Hosseini 423) Her mother before her death revealed that her father had been sending money to his half-brother, Iqbal and Pari would be responsible for sending the money someday. Even though they were struggling financially in a different country, Abdullah felt an obligated sense to send money. The burden of his father's legacy had been handed upon Pari. A child taking care of his or her parents is a form of envy worthy of respect as per the norms of society. Caring is itself a quality that make men humane. At the expense of being called good names and praises, it always comes with a price of giving up certain things. If a child expresses her thought that concerns leaving her parents, it can

arouse a sense of pity for the parents and immense hatred for the child from the society. These conflicts can cause identity crisis of what a person wanted to be and who a person is subjected to become.

Conclusion

In today's culture and society, humans are evolving in every aspect. Children, being the pillars of the future, need to be inculcated and moulded carefully. They should be given ample opportunities of growth and the study of their vulnerabilities against various forces should not take a back seat. Their vulnerabilities are reimagined through the characters' arcs across key dimensions in this paper. The main framework of this paper is based on the vulnerability theory as given by Pramod K Nayar which he explains in his book, *The Extreme in Contemporary Culture* (2017) that humans are exposed to physical or psychological vulnerability due to extreme circumstances. These extreme circumstances create helplessness and deformities among children. He touches the themes of precarity as a factor of vulnerability especially in children. Moreover, the theme of resilience as shown by the characters in the novel are reanalysed in the light of the vulnerability theory. This paper humbly draws the attention of the public towards the challenges faced by vulnerable children all over the world and find ways to emancipate them. Thus, this work of Hosseini moves forward and highlights that there are miles still left to overcome through multiple narratives.

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