



Adoption and Women's Identity: The Dynamics of Relationship in Khaled Hosseini's novel "And The Mountains Echoed"

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Abstract

The societal pressure on women to become a mother has been exerted since time immemorial. The attainment of motherhood is said to complete a woman's life in the eyes of her family as well as the society in which she lives. Khaled Hosseini's fictional work *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013), gives a glimpse of a woman and the importance of motherhood attached to her position, besides the practice of adoption to resolve the problem of infertility. Adoption was the only alternative in the past but fertility treatments has brought significant changes in the lives of many childless couples. Hosseini depicts the bond between Nila and her adopted daughter Pari, and the cracks that appear in their relationship with the passage of time. Nila's unsuccessful attempt to embrace motherhood through adoption does not pave the way for her happiness in life. She is unable to maintain a lasting bond with her adopted daughter who failed to understand her while she was alive. Pari yearned for her adoptive parent's presence, and realized the importance of having a mother in her life only after she had had children of her own.

Keywords: Adoption, motherhood, adoptee, adoptive parent, blood ties

Introduction

In the past, adoption was the only option for a childless couple to raise a child as their own and make their family complete. There are also instances of single parents especially women who resort to adoption without the need to satisfy societal demands for marriage. At present, there are other options before one decides to settle for adoption due to the availability of fertility treatments and surrogacy. In "Adoption and the Circulation of Children: A Comparative Perspective" *Cross-Cultural Approaches to Adoption* (2004), Fiona Bowie states that the term 'adoption' in societies is used for "the transference of full parental rights from birth to social parents, in contrast to fostering in which a partial transfer occurs" (Bowie 5). Elsbeth Neil and Mary Beek in "Respecting Children's Relationships and Identities in Adoption", *The Routledge Handbook of Adoption* (2020), writes that although adoption confers lifelong relationships and a sense of belonging for many children in the adoptive family, "adoption also involves the legal severance of the child from the birth family and often the loss of key relationships with the birth family members and others who

have had important roles in the child's life" (Neil, Elsbeth and Mary Beek 76). Hence the child loses identity as a member of the birth community.

Adoption in relation to Women

A woman faces many challenges in this world besides trying to meet the expectations of society in achieving motherhood after marriage. Simone De Beauvoir defines a woman as "a womb, an ovary" in *The Second Sex* (De Beauvoir 1953). She states that the term 'female' is sufficient enough to define a woman, which she considers as "derogatory not because it emphasizes woman's animality, but because it imprisons her in her sex" (De Beauvoir 3). In Chapter XVII of the book she explores the topic of motherhood and various issues connected to it:

It is in maternity that woman fulfill her physiological destiny; it is her natural 'calling', since her whole organic structure is adapted for the perpetuation of the species (509)

The early twentieth century's obsession with motherhood which was similar to the late nineteenth century's has been explored by Claudia Nelson in *Little Strangers: Portrayals of Adoption and Foster Care in America, (1850-1929)* (2003). She writes that motherhood was announced by the pundits as "the crowning achievement of a woman's life, the greatest gift she could ever give to society, the greatest happiness she could find for herself" (Nelson 124). In "The Backpackers that come to Stay: New challenges to Norwegian transnational adoptive Families" *Cross-Cultural Approaches to Adoption* (2004), Signe Howell writes that "contemporary cultural expectations hold that a woman, and increasingly a man, cannot fulfill themselves without embracing parenthood" (Howell 227). She mentions that the various forms of new reproductive technologies (NRT) and adoption are the two available options for those who are not able to have children of their own. In *Adopting Maternity: White Women who Adopt Transracially or Transnationally* (2004), Nora Rose Moosnick mentions Rickie Solinger's work *Beggars and Choosers: How the Politics of Choice shapes Adoption* which links adoption policies with the welfare of poor women. In her view, middle-class and White people are supported to become parents by legislative mandates, whereas the efforts of poor women to raise their children are undercut:

Poor women are encouraged to relinquish their children while middle-class women are helped to parent: policies are even promoted that subsidize fertility treatments for the middle-class (Moosnick 3)

In *Reading Adoption: Family and Difference in Fiction and Drama* (2005), Marianne Novy writes that an unmarried woman is permitted to start a new life through adoption whereas a married couple is enabled to adopt a child they wanted. Nancy E. Dowd's "A Feminist Analysis of Adoption", *Harvard Law Review* (1994) which reviews Elizabeth Bartholet's work asserts that "the justification for the traditional construction of adoption was the condemnation of unwed motherhood" (Dowd 926). Hence, adoption was considered favourable in resolving an undesirable situation.

Women's identity in adoption in Khaled Hosseini's "And The Mountains Echoed"

Khaled Hosseini's *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013) also explores the theme of adoption whereby the complex relationship between the adoptee and the adoptive mother runs its course ending in tragedy. A young child, Pari was brought by her father from their village of Shadbagh, Afghanistan, and surrendered to a rich, childless couple, Mr. and Mrs. Wahdati in Kabul city. The fictional work presents the unhappy marital life of the Wahdatis, Suleiman and Nila, who are incompatible to each other. Suleiman Wahdati was a closeted gay who was secretly in love with the chauffeur cum cook Nabi, the step uncle of Pari. Nila was a

free spirit who had written poems about her relationships before her marriage. She had undergone an operation in Delhi which had prevented any chance of her becoming a mother. She had felt that she left “something vital of myself behind in India” (243). When Nila visited Nabi’s sister Parwana and her family, she had been overjoyed to meet the children especially Pari. She had bitterly cried and confessed to Nabi about her not being able to conceive and have a baby of her own:

It’s gone. They scooped it all out of me in India. I’m hollow inside (Hosseini 108)

Motherhood was denied to Nila which had led her to breakdown in front of Nabi after meeting his niece and nephew. Nabi’s deep love and affection for Nila made him to rashly plan in order to give Nila “something no other man—not her husband, not the owner of that big pink house- could” (115). He had come into an agreement with Saboor, Pari’s father who decided to give his only daughter up for adoption to the Wahdatis. At the very outset, Nila Wahdati’s purpose of adopting a child was to bring change to her mundane life as she believed that “It will be good to have a child around the house. A little noise...A little life” (49). Pari was instructed to address Nila as “Maman” and Mr. Wahdati as “Papa” once she settled in the adoptive family home. Suleiman later warmed up to Pari and started spending time with her. He was affectionate with the young child and helped to lessen her feelings of homesickness. The entry of Pari in the lives of Nila and Suleiman Wahdati brought unity amongst the couple. They spend time with Pari, and as adoptive parents did their utmost to make her feel at home. Pari had gradually started to forget about her family in Shadbagh and her past life after being immensely loved by the Wahdatis. Nila’s motherly affection is seen in her behavior towards Pari with whom she spends quality time together. She gave her undivided attention and love to Pari who consumed her time with “lessons, games, naps, walks, more games” (119).

The comparatively warm bond between the mother and daughter began to gradually wane as Nila was unable to be a motherly figure to Pari while she was growing up. When Pari was six years old, Suleiman Wahdati suffered a stroke which left him bedridden and unable to speak. Nila couldn’t pretend to be a perfect wife and left for Paris, taking her adopted daughter Pari with her. As time passed, Nila frequently gets into accidents due to heavy drinking and is taken to hospitals to treat her wounds. A chance meeting of Nila with Julien, a professor of economics, at the hospital’s emergency room led to a romantic relationship between the couple. Pari is also attracted to the handsome Julien but tries to suppress her feelings. Julien showed interest in Pari and wanted Nila to tag her daughter along on their outings. The romance was short lived and lasted for six months which resulted in Nila cooped up in her apartment for weeks. Pari wondered whether her mother had ended the relationship with Julien when she discovered that they were drawn to each other. Pari reconnected with Julien after almost a decade and their feelings had not diminished. Their relationship was not approved by Nila who found it difficult to accept it calmly. Nila had expressed dissatisfaction with Pari’s lack of appreciation to everything she had done for her. She regarded her as thoughtless person for her lack of understanding towards her and believed that Pari was her “punishment” (246)

Nancy Newton Verrier in *The Primal Wound: Understanding the Adopted Child* (1997), states that it is necessary to acknowledge and mourn loss. In her view “every adoptee, birthmother, and adoptive parent has experienced loss, and the appropriate response to loss is mourning” (Verrier 187). The deprivation of a mother’s love after her parents’ separation might have resulted in Nila lacking in motherly qualities. She had a controlling father who had her custody, and hence starved for love and sympathy. She took solace in having relationships with men in Kabul, and writing erotic poetry to challenge her father’s oppressive authority. She became depressed after being rendered incapable of having a child due to an operation. She accepted Suleiman Wahdati’s offer of marriage during the darkest period of her life in a vulnerable state. Her married life was a disappointment as her husband remained aloof and there was hardly any display of affection between the couple. After meeting the children of Nabi’s sister she felt the need to become a mother herself. She had believed that as a married woman she will feel complete after having a child of her own like other women. However, her longing for motherhood could not be fulfilled and led to a series of disappointments.

The unexpressed grief of a father for his daughter whom he has given up for adoption is presented through the character of Saboor who wished to give Pari a better life. Saboor regrets his decision in surrendering his only daughter Pari to Nila and Suleiman Wahdati, an action which haunts him throughout his life. Being from an underprivileged family, he decides to give her up to the wealthy but childless Wahdatis in order to safeguard her from a poverty stricken life. Pari's mother had died giving birth to her and she had not known a mother's love except her stepmother Parwana's who had a child of her own, and "they were another woman's leftovers" (Hosseini 25). Saboor was deeply affected by the absence of his beloved daughter Pari who was left behind in Kabul city. He had impulsively cut down the giant oak tree where his father had installed a swing for him, and later his own children, Abdullah and Pari had enjoyed swinging on it. He had taken down the swing, and hacked at the tree "with violence, with his jaw firmly set and a cloud over his face like he couldn't bear to look at it any longer" (52). Saboor had forbidden Abdullah from crying in the house and he had obeyed his father's orders. Although he tried to hide his sadness, Abdullah noticed that a great change had come over his father who was no longer the same person after he returned to their village having left his daughter behind in Kabul. Saboor had stopped telling stories, and had become more withdrawn and silent. The Wahdatis were neither in favour of Pari's family visiting her nor maintaining contact with her. Nabi also was no longer welcomed by Saboor in the village and he never saw them again.

In *Reading Adoption: Family and Difference in Fiction and Drama* (2005), Marianne Novy highlights that an adopted woman may be confronted with her relation to the adopted as well as her birth parents throughout her life. Furthermore, Novy writes that scholars like Marianne Hirsch argued that feminist criticism emphasize less on the mother's perspective and more on the daughter's perspective. Nevertheless, she opines that "

But neither has enough attention has been paid to the standpoint of the adopted daughter, the adoptive mother, the birth mother, or the men in similar positions (Novy 30-31)

The lack of understanding that Pari had for her adoptive mother makes her feel remorseful as Nila only needed kindness and emotional support from her. Pari realized that both she and Julien were responsible in pushing Nila to despair which eventually led to her committing suicide. Although Nila was a strong and liberal minded woman, "she had also very deep sadness" (440). Her life was full of emptiness, and she had expected Pari to fill up the holes in her life. However, Pari could not make her happy and instead she had done reckless things which had hurt Nila. Pari was a disappointment to her mother as she was "supposed to bring an end to all the drinking, the men, the years squandered making desperate lunges at happiness" (251). Pari grew up in a world of luxury and comfort, and received love and affection from her adoptive parents. But as years passed the relations between her and her adoptive mother had underwent a change. Pari moved on in life and achieved success in her studies and career, whereas Nila had continued to slide towards self-destruction. She realized that she had greatly disappointed her mother, leaving Nila more damaged and derailed as she, Pari, "wasn't nearly enough" (251). Pari's lack of awareness about Nila's lonely life made her grieve after her death that she had not been understanding and empathetic towards her.

The breakdown in the relations between Nila and her adopted daughter Pari had made her isolate herself from others and taking solace in drinking, eventually getting hospitalized after getting into accidents. In an interview to a Parisian journal, Nila had said that she had moved to France to save her daughter from the oppressive life in Afghanistan, where women live a life of servitude. She expressed her frustration on Pari's lackadaisical attitude about the privileges she could enjoy in Paris, France by telling the interviewer that "children are never anything you'd hoped for ..." (Hosseini 208). Nila felt deeply unappreciated by Pari for the new life she was living in Europe unlike in her former country of Afghanistan. When Pari informed Nila that she was in a relationship with Julien, her former lover, she expressed her anger and disgust vehemently for the betrayal, indirectly hinting that there are no blood ties between them:

I look at you sometimes and I don't see me in you. Of course I don't. I suppose that isn't

unexpected, after all. I don't know what sort of person you are, Pari. I don't know who you are,

What you're capable of, in your blood. You're a stranger to me (Hosseini 235).

Nancy Newton Verrier focuses on the complications of the relationship between the adoptive mother and the adoptee in *The Primal Wound: Understanding the Adoptive Child* (1997). She states that although the adoptive mother has limitations placed upon her, "she can and does make a big difference in the life of her child" (Verrier 64). In the end Pari had not intended to tell her children about their grandmother's suicide even though her daughter Isabelle was curious about her. She was unwilling to make them have thoughts that "a parent is capable of abandoning her children, of saying to them *"You are not enough"*" (Hosseini 262). Her husband Eric, and her children had always been enough for her and she was contented with it. However, she started to appreciate her adoptive mother better after she had children of her own and longed for her presence at important as well as random moments of her life. While her three year old daughter Isabelle became seriously ill in Paris, Pari was in Munich for a conference, and became worried about her condition. She remembered how her adoptive mother Nila had stayed with her after she was hospitalized with pneumonia which gave rise to a belated kinship with her:

She has missed her many times over the last few years. At her wedding, of course. At Isabelle's birth. And at myriad random moments. But never more so than on this terrible and wondrous nights in this hotel room in Munich (258).

In adoption, the parental rights of the birth parents are transferred to the adoptive parents. Closed adoptions are favoured over open adoptions as it will legally sever the child from her birthparents. However, Nancy E. Dowd in "A Feminist Analysis of Adoption", *Harvard Law Review* (1994) highlighted the inclusion of the birthparents within the adoptive family as "the child needs to know who they are, and may want to establish a relationship with their birthparents as a child or later as an adult" (Dowd 930). Pari met her brother Abdullah for the first time in America after decades of separation. Markos Varvaris, a plastic surgeon who worked in Kabul had informed her about the letter left by her uncle Nabi. The letter revealed to her the hidden secrets of her past life and family which Nabi had been eager for Pari to know. Pari learned about her separation from her family who had no contact with her after she was taken to the Wahdati household in Kabul. However, Nila's lies about Pari's childhood had been known by her for a long time. Nabi realized that he had been instrumental in separating Pari from her family especially her beloved brother Abdullah. Hence, he had asked Markos Varvaris to pass the letter to Pari as he wanted to leave the world in peace without the load of guilt on his mind. When Pari finally met her brother, he had already lost his memory and failed to recognize her. Although it was heart breaking for Pari to meet Abdullah in this condition, she was still glad to find him and his daughter who was named after her. She felt happy to have "found a part of myself that was lost" (451).

Conclusion

The present paper offers a perspective on adoption through discussions on select texts based on adoption. The dynamics of relationship between an adoptive mother and an adoptee, Nila and Pari has been explored with regard to adoption and the identity of women in Khaled Hosseini's novel *And the Mountains Echoed*. Nila's failure to achieve motherhood had a deep impact on her life and she had suffered silently due to this unfulfilled wish to have her own child. Although she strived to be a mother to her adopted daughter Pari, she was unable to take control of her life which led her to start drinking. Pari's inability to understand her mother's troubled life resulted in the weakening of their relations. The demise of Nila by suicide had made Pari realize the importance of having a mother and left her with many regrets.

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