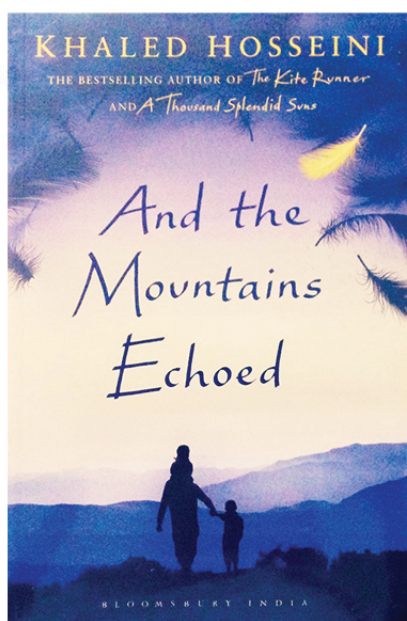


Book Review:

And the Mountains Echoed

Henry Cheong



My encounter with Khaled Hosseini began when I came across the film adapted from his first acclaimed novel *The Kite Runner* (2003) a few years ago. The film itself did not strike me as particularly mesmerizing back then - part of me blamed myself for not having read the book; part of me simply thought the plot was banal and unimpressive. Admittedly, it was not until I had a chance to go through the entire book a while ago that my opinion towards this writer changed. In fact, I found that his narrative works so much better on paper than in moving pictures. His genius as a story-teller makes his narrative both gripping and exciting, allowing us to get a glimpse of the protagonist's consciousness, which makes up the main part of the novel. Last week, I managed to finish his most recent work *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013), which, similar to his first novel *The Kite Runner*, deals with some of his recurring themes such as memories, family and regrets in life.

And the Mountains Echoed is essentially a loose amalgamation of nine individual stories, each occupying one chapter, narrating the interconnected lives of three different generations of people in Afghanistan and those in diaspora as a consequence of the wars in that region. The novel starts with a father telling his children a fairy tale featuring traditional *divs* and *jinns* that abducts the daughter of a poor family for a promising future in a more affluent family. The father painfully gives up his loved one for a greater cause, knowing that she will never be able to lead a life of comfort and luxury if she stays. Such a tale sets up the tone and theme of the entire novel - you will encounter different individuals narrating their life stories and hear about how they are confronted with difficult decisions, regrets, and abandonment.

The main driving force of the novel is the characters' will to redeem and to atone, and their wish to look for the missing puzzle in their lives. The alluded counterpart of the daughter in the fable, Pari, taken away by her uncle for a rich couple who fail to bear children, has a profound realization when she reaches adulthood. Feeling doubtful about her own heritage after the death of her step-mother, Pari describes her state in limbo, claiming 'it is important to know ... your roots ... to know where you started as a person. If not, your own life would seem unreal to you as if you have missed the beginning of a story and now you are in the middle of it, trying to understand'. In fact, this unsettling sentiment and this sense of 'unrealness' permeates the life of everyone. Despite their different life journeys across generations, each character lacks something in life to make it fulfilled, be it an apology, a chance to repent, or a wish to do something.

And the Mountains Echoed is a page-turner. Reading this book can be likened to reading a detective novel. There are major holes and missing parts in each character's life, making the reader eager to solve the mystery to fill up the empty spaces. Towards the end of the novel, we can loosely form a big picture of the relationship amongst characters and the effects of the actions they have on one another. As readers, we have the privilege to gain access to each of their stories, their secrets, their confessions and their wishes, but we are also painfully aware of how many of these characters are unable to hear from those they hold dear. Unlike *The Kite Runner*, where Hosseini decides to leave the protagonist, Amir, with everlasting regret of his selfish deeds, this time he resolves the many intricate plots by ending the novel on a more positive note. As readers, we will be satisfied to see how he manages to both shatter and mend our heart and soul.

I would recommend this novel to everyone. Its heartbreaking and unforgettable plots weave a powerful piece that testifies to our own capacity for sorrow and happiness. With the historical context of Afghanistan as the backdrop in his work, he also explores the emotions that are universally felt by all. Whilst some argue that Hosseini fails to create characters of depth in this work because of their brief appearance, I see this as an appropriate compromise since it strengthens his theme: we, too, only get to encounter some people very briefly. They come and go. We may not get a chance to see them or interact with them once that moment of our life has passed.