

**Alienation in And the Mountains Echoed by Khaled Hussein**

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**Abstract**

Alienation is one of the controversial terms that has as much as definitions as the number of social sciences. Many classical writers used alienation as a theme of their writings because of its significance in the life of human beings. Yet, in the modern age, the phenomenon has not lost its significance and it drew the attention of many researchers and writers to write about it. This paper is an attempt to explore this phenomenon in one of the novels of the Afghan-American writer Khalid Hosseini. First, the term is illustrated and some definitions are provided. Then the researcher references to the Melvin Seeman's five variants of alienation (powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement) and uses them as a framework for discussing and understanding the way the term is treated by the novelist. The researcher tries to investigate how the novelist treated with this phenomenon in *And the Mountain Echoed* and how reflects in the life of the characters. Many characters in the story go through alienation and they feel isolated from their environment, things, other people and even themselves. I try to find out the source of their alienation and how it affects the course of their lives.

**Key Words:**

Alienation, powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, self-estrangement, Khalid Hussein, *And the Mountains Echoed*.

**Introduction**

As Warren D. Tenhouren quoted from Mose Peckham "Alienation was the problem of the 1840s, and it is the problem today." (TenHouten, 2016, p. 7) After 42 years of Mose's book, alienation is still a problem and will remain as a problem of human beings. Concerning the existence of this phenomenon in human history, Semman quoted Erich Kahlher's remark in his article, *On the Meaning of Alienation*, "The history of man could very well be written as a history of the alienation of man." (Seeman, 1959, p. 783) So still it requires more research to be done to have a better understanding of the phenomenon. It drew the attention a lot of the modern researchers and writers. It is also one of the controversial concepts and we have different definitions of it and few people know exactly what the concept means (Schacht, 2015)

If we have a quick literature review of the term we see that there are as many different definitions as the social sciences. Each social science introduces the concept from its perspective and sometimes their definitions are "self-contradictory" or "overlapping". (Geyer, 1974) Having so many definitions of the term is not always good for the researchers and readers as some times they may face confusion and find themselves in a vague impression. In spite of this fact, still, we need to know what is alienation and provide some definitions. Jaggi in his book *Alienation* defines the term as a state where one cannot form a relationship with other people, things, social organizations and above all with oneself. The one who feels alienated sees the world as an absurd and meaningless place, a world where one does not feel comfortable, does not consider it as home, and feels powerless in front of it. The alienated person feels like an outsider to itself and no more finds himself as an "actively effective subject" but a "passive object" in the absurd world. (Jaeggi, 2014)

According to Sidney J. Jackson, Eric Fromm is one of the great writers that had a great role in popularizing the term in modern America. (Jackson, 1983) Erich Fromm in his book, *The Sane Society*, defines the term as a 'mode of experience' in which one might find himself as an 'alien'. He is estranged from himself.

The alienated person is not the center of his world nor the owner of his actions, but a submissive being of the results of his own actions. He has no real emotional relations or connections with himself or the world and people outside his world. He is more treated as a thing or an object rather than an emotional being. (Fromm, 1956)

Clark in his article, *Measuring Alienation Within a Social System*, provides a definition and stated: "alienation is the degree to which man feels powerless to achieve the role he has determined to be rightfully his in specific situations." (Clark, 1959) So this phenomenon happens when a person sees that cannot play the role in the communities he\she dreams to have or he\she is unable to get what he\she desires. Then, this leads to a feeling of disappointment and finds himself\herself as an isolated being.

As quoted in (Nettler, 1957) Grodzins defines alienation as a condition where a person has no feeling of 'belonging' to his society or country. The alienated person does not satisfy with personal relationships. He states that the alienated person is "potentially disloyal citizens" and this phenomenon may happen in some kinds of personalities and societies. (Nettler, 1957)

Irene Taviss (1969) in his article, *Changes in the Form of Alienation: The 1900's vs. The 1950's*, mentions two different types of alienation. He states that very little attention is given to differentiate between the two types of alienation, social alienation, and self-alienation. Due to this failure, some confusion may arise between various theorists' definition of the terms. For the author, social alienation is a state in which a person may consider the 'social system' that he lives in as 'oppressive' and 'incompatible' with some of his temptations and this leads him to feel isolated from the society. But self-alienation is a state in which the person may not find any connection between his 'inclinations' with the social values or norms. (Taviss, 1969) The author goes further and states the different characteristics of each one of the kinds of alienation. According to him the features of social alienation are "(1) isolation or estrangement from other people, (2) estrangement from norms and values, and (3) violative behavior – and for self-alienation (1) suppression of or distance from needs (2) objectification of self and projection of powers, and (3) over-incorporation into society." (Taviss, 1969, p. 47)

Karl Marx is another philosopher that illustrated the phenomenon of alienation, specifically in his early writings. He is the one that introduced alienation into the social sciences generally. (Jackson, 1983) Marx introduces four different types of alienation. (1) Objectification: alienation of labor from what they produce. The worker 'loses' control over the things he produces and the product stands against the producer. Man wants to shape nature through the consequences of his labor, but the result is that the man's own labor would manipulate man as an isolated being. (2) Self-Alienation: alienation of man from his own working and 'work as life-activity'. The labor that is produced by man would be an outside force and then leads to self-alienation and man considers himself as a stranger that has no connection to his production. Because the action of producing becomes routine and no attention is given to the psychological aspect of the worker. (3) Species Alienation: alienation from the 'species being'. Man is a laboring animal with free will, unlike the other animals who are under compulsion to work. When a man is obliged to work and alienated from his own production, would lead to feel alienated from his species being. In such condition, man loses his identity and finds himself as a degrading machine and 'mentally and physically dehumanized'. (4) Alienation from fellow man. This kind is a direct result of the previous one. When an individual is isolated from his production loses his identity, would be an estranged being and alienated from his fellow men and society as well. (Geyer R. F., 1976) (Shah, 2015) So we see that Marx views alienation from an economic perspective. He believes that man is a laboring animal and the only distinction with other animals is that he is not strictly obliged to work. Man's labor and work can be productive only when he is free and options are provided. In a capitalist society, it would somehow be impossible for a person to be free to work. a worker works but he is alienated from his own works and things produced. So in the end, the consequences would lead a man to feel estranged and alienated from his work, his production, species being, fellow men and himself as well.

## 2. Seeman's Variants of Alienation in And the Mountains Echoed

Seeman (1959) in his paper *On the Meaning of Alienation*, states the aim of his article as "to provide an approach that ties the historical interest in alienation to the modern empirical effort." (Seeman, 1959) Seeman distinguishes five different alternative meaning of alienation: 'powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement'. The author believes that alienation had those five different usages in the past. Seeman treats with the phenomenon from a 'social-psychological' perspective. He tries to find out "(a) the social conditions that produce these five variants of alienation, or (b) their behavioral consequences." (Seeman, 1959, p. 784)

But the question of why Seeman's set of variants may come up for the readers. The researcher has chosen Seeman's variants of alienation as a framework because Seeman collected all of the different meanings of alienation that were discussed in the past by the great writers and theorists. According to Senekal (2010), there are many classifications in the past but none of them is useful as Seeman's for the current studies. He writes "Seeman reformulated and elaborated on Marx's notion of alienation, and formulated a methodological framework, which is better suited to the study of sociological tendencies." (Senekal, 2010, pp. 21-2) Even though there are writers that see alienation as a procedure rather than as some different variants. Halim Barakat in his article, A Process of Encounter between Utopia and Reality, sees alienation as 'a process rather than a set of variants.' He clarifies the process well and writes, the aim of his paper is "making a distinction between source of alienation, alienation as a mode of experience and consequences of alienation." (Barakat, 1969, p. 1) The researcher believes that Seeman's set of variants is a better framework to investigate the treatment of the phenomenon in a work of fiction. He makes an attempt to find out the source of the alienation and the behavioral consequences of alienation.

This paper tries to discuss and analyze the theme of alienation in Khalid Hosseini's *And the Mountains Echoed* novel based on Seeman's approach. Furthermore, each one of the variants would be illustrated and then analyzed how each one reflects in the life of the characters. The researcher tries to analyze the characters that are facing the phenomenon in the story of the novel. He would find the source of the feeling of alienations and how it affects their behavior in the course of their lives.

Khalid Hussein from the very beginning of the novel through a fable story of separation between a father and a son that is narrated by Saboor to Pari and Abdullah prepares the readers to the great separation between Pari and Abdulla. A separation that affects the characters after generation and readers go with until the end of the novel. This separation would affect the lives of many characters in the novel and they experience a kind of alienation. Alienation is one of the main themes of the novel. Many characters face alienation and each one experiences at least a variant of alienation if not more. The researcher tries to distinguish the alienation that characters experience or face according to the five different variants of Semman.

### 2.1 Powerlessness

Seeman considers powerlessness as the first use of alienation. This use is taken from the Marxian view of labor's situation in a 'capitalist society'. The government or the company takes away the rights and means of a decision of the labor. (Seeman, 1959) according to Seeman this variant of alienation can be considered as "as the expectancy or probability held by the individual that his own behavior cannot determine the occurrence of the outcomes, or reinforcements, he seeks." (Seeman, 1959, p. 784)

In this sense and meaning of alienation, there are many examples in the novel that we can provide and discuss from this perspective of alienation. The novel begins with the story of the separation of Baba Ayub and Qais. Qais is the youngest and most beloved son of Baba Ayub. Saboor narrates this story for his two children, Abdullah and Pari. Through this story of separation, the writer prepares the readers for the great separation of Abdulla and Pari which is the heart of the separations in the novel. It happened one day that a div came to Maidan Sabz...Everyone at the village knew why the div had come...Families prayed that the div would bypass their home for they knew that if the div tapped on their roof, they would have to give it one child...I guess you know which rooftop received the div's dreaded tap. (Hosseini, 2013, p. 8)

The div lets the parents surrender one of their children to the div. Baba Ayub is really powerless in front of the div and he is sure that takes one of them. The div takes the youngest and most beloved son of Baba Ayub. This event can be analyzed under the shed light of the first variant of alienation. If we see from a Marxian view Baba Ayub can be considered as a worker that is powerless in front of the decisions of the ruling capitalist, who is the Div, and Qais is the product of Baba Ayub. Baba Ayub would get alienated from his own product that is Qais. After Baba Ayub's separation with his beloved son, Baba Ayub experiences a kind of alienation. The consequence of the separation leads to this: He didn't work, didn't pray, hardly ate. His wife and children pleaded with him, but it was no good. His remaining sons had to take over his work, for every day Baba Ayub did nothing but sit at the edge of his field, a lone, wretched figure gazing toward the mountains. He stopped speaking to the villagers. (Hosseini, 2013, p. 9)

It is crystal clear that the separation and the alienation affected Baba Ayub's life Socially and psychologically. Socially he is alienated from other people of the village including his family members or we can say he is alienated from the whole society. psychologically, he is in a struggle with himself in what to do to correct his decision. Also, he has alienated from himself and always sits alone and is in deep thinking.

### 2.2 Meaninglessness

The second form of the alienation term can be summarized as the idea of meaninglessness. Seeman states that alienation in this usage is when “the individual is unclear as to what he ought to believe when the individual’s minimal standards for clarity in decision-making are not met.” (Seeman, 1959, p. 786) So the one that alienated in this sense cannot make a decision as there is not sufficient information and clarity. As he cannot choose among the options, he is not capable of predicting the results of his action. Then the person faces a situation that finds it meaningless as the consequences are not predictable.

Another event of the novel that is somehow the same just like Baba Ayub’s story, is the story of the separation of Abdullah and Pari, two of the main characters of the novel. This separation is the heart or core of the separations of the novel and would, in some way, affect the lives of most of the characters of the novel.

Saboor, Abdullah and Pari’s father, is very poor and hardly can provide his family’s bread. He lost a boy as he was so poor that he did not have enough money to buy warm clothes and other necessary things for him and protect him from the harsh and merciless winter. Uncle Nabi works for Wahdati’s family and arranges the Sale of Pari to Wahdati’s family. Saboor faces a situation that he cannot predict the consequences of his decision, the decision of selling Pari to Wahdati’s family. Saboor experiences this form of alienation as he is between two difficult options, selling Pari and getting money to protect his other children from one side and keeping Pari and waiting for the hard, brutal and merciless winter to take away one or two of his children. He was sure that he cannot provide a decent life or at least protect them from the harsh winter. So due to economic condition and poverty, he would choose to sell Pari and get some money to protect the others. After the selling, Saboor finds himself disappointed and feels very isolated. In chapter two when the novel is narrated from Abdullah’s perspective, he would let us know how his father’s life changed after abandoning Pari to Wahdati’s family. Abdullah says:

**“Maybe, Abdullah thought, Father had sold the Wahdati’s muse as well.**

**Gone.**

**Vanished.**

**Nothing left.**

**Nothing said.” (Hosseini, 2013, p. 30)**

We know that even though Saboor sold Pari he has great affection to his daughter. We see that Saboor no more narrates stories and everything is gone with Pari. Abdullah very easily realizes that his father estranged from himself and society. Even when Uncle Nabi pays them a visit, Saboor does not want to see him again as if Nabi obliged him to sell Pari. “Saboor said pointedly, “You’ve given your gifts. Now it’s time to go.” ... Saboor did not want to set eyes on me again and I understood.” (Hosseini, 2013, p. 59)

### 2.3 Normlessness

This one is derived from Durkheim’s description of “anomie.” It refers to a state of ‘normlessness’. In traditional usage, anomie refers to a social condition that all the social norms and values are disintegrated and people do not consider them as effective rules of their conduct. (Seeman, 1959)

Many characters have problems with social norms and values. Nila Wahdatti is the one that is so obvious in having this variant of alienation. She has problems with social rules. We find no connection between Nila and the Afghan social and cultural values and norms even though she was born in Afghanistan. The following excerpt in chapter four from Uncle Nabi’s letter to Markos may reveal some facts about Nila’s feeling of normlessness. But Nila’s poems defied tradition. They followed no preset meter or rhyming pattern. Nor did they deal with the usual things, trees and spring flowers and bulbul birds. Nila wrote about love, and by love I do not mean the Sufi yearnings of Rumi or Hafez but instead physical love. She wrote about lovers whispering across pillows, touching each other. She wrote about pleasure. I had never heard language such as this spoken by a woman. (Hosseini, 2013, p. 56)

Nila is a poet, but not a poet that follows the traditional way of writing poems. She defies all the social and cultural rules that confine a woman. She is unlike Rumi or Hafez, speaks about physical love which is a taboo for a woman in such kind of culture. The quote shows how she never cares about the social values and it is only a sample of her life. Nila is so alienated that ‘social norms no longer effective as rules for behavior.’ She experiences a kind of normlessness

Nila is born from an Afghan father and a French mother. She is not tied to the Afghan Culture and society. Her marriage to Mr. Wahdati was an escape from his father's house. Nila faced so many allegations like 'she had no nang and namoos, no honor,' but as the social and cultural norms and rules were not important for her, as Uncle Nabi Narrates, "Worst of all, he said, not only had she made no attempt to deny these allegations, she wrote poems about them." (Hosseini, 2013, p. 47) Because it was not important for her to be called or referred to as any name.

Also when her husband Suleiman had a kind of heart attack, according to social and cultural rules and values, Nila has to stay beside him and welcome their guests. Despite this fact, Nila neither cares about Mr. Sulaiman nor about the guests. Uncle Nabi again in chapter four tells us about another situation that clarifies how Nila experienced this feeling of normlessness. "When people were packing the house wall to wall, Nila retreated upstairs into Pari's bedroom with her," (Hosseini, 2013, p. 60)

### 2.4 Isolation

The fourth type of alienation is called isolation. According to Seeman "The alienated in the isolation sense are those who, like the intellectual assign low reward value to goals or beliefs that are typically highly valued in the given society." (Seeman, 1959, pp. 788-9) The alienated being does not care about the things that are considered as significant by most of the people. In Nettler's language, the person is isolated from his society and culture. (Seeman, 1959)

In this regard, there are two characters that experience this form of alienation more than the other characters. Mr. and Mrs. Wahdati are a married couple that they live under the same roof but they are so disconnected and have no spiritual relations. Uncle Nabi in chapter four narrates "I knew from the start that the marriage was an unhappy one. Rarely did I see a tender look pass between the couple or hear an affectionate word uttered." (Hosseini, 2013, p. 48) Both of them are not giving high values to social and cultural norms and rules. To prove the statement there are many situations in the story but providing two excerpts for each one may suffice to show the truth of the statement.

Every morning after breakfast Mr. Wahdati took Uncle Nabi with himself for a morning walk. All the time they walk together Mr. Wahdati would make no communication with Nabi. He is always silence. He gives no values to the social rules and norms which are important for people. As Uncle Nabi says in chapter four, "He hardly said a word to me in the course of these walks and seemed forever lost in his own thoughts..... The rest of the day, he mostly retreated to his study upstairs, reading or playing a game of chess against himself." (Hosseini, 2013, p. 45) Mr. Wahdati behaves as if he is the last man on earth. He makes no connection or communication with anyone. Even when he plays a game of chess he would play alone and does not share with anyone. Mr. Wahdati, comparing to the other characters, is more educated. This can be a reason that always pushes him to retreat from society and the other people.

Nila, the beautiful wife of Mr. Suleiman Wahdati, from the very beginning when appears in the story, she seems has no real connection to her society and culture. To escape her loneliness and unhappy marriage, she accepts Nabi's suggestion to adopt Pari as her own daughter. Even Pari cannot save Nila from the feeling of isolation and estrangement. When she is in Paris she considers her decision of the adoption as a mistake. In the end nothing can save her from this feeling, that is why, maybe, in the end she decides to commit suicide. In chapter six through an interview reveals a lot about her character and personality. She says "I had little interest in food or conversation or entertainment. I was averse to visitors. I just wanted to pull the curtains and sleep all day every day. Which was what I did mostly." (Hosseini, 2013, p. 115) She always wanted to keep away herself from society and the people because she could not build a real relationship with them. She finds it too difficult to continue to live with her dad, as her dad considered her writings as 'the ramblings of a whore.' Also, he said that she 'damaged his family name beyond repair.' That is why when Mr. Suleiman Wahdati asks her father for her hand directly she accepts the proposal. In the interview in chapter six, she reveals the secret of this acceptance. "That was how I felt, disoriented, suspended in confusion, stripped of my compass. Unspeakably depressed as well. And, in that state, you are vulnerable. Which is likely why I said yes the following year, in 1949, when Suleiman Wahdati asked my father for my hand." (Hosseini, 2013, p. 115)

### 2.5 Self-Estrangement

The final usage of alienation refers to self-estrangement. This type of alienation is mostly taken from Eric Fromm. In his book, *The Sane Society*, he writes "By alienation is meant a mode of experience in which the person experiences himself as an alien. He has become, one might say, estranged from himself." (Fromm, 1956, p. 117) according to Seeman, self-estrangement refers to a situation in which a person cannot discover 'self-rewarding'. In this sense, the workers, the housewives anyone that works 'only for its effect on others' all are different types of self-estrangement in a different level. (Seeman, 1959)

In *And the Mountains Echoed* many characters experience this form of alienation. The separation of Abdullah and Pari can be seen as the source of many of the alienations in the novel, and it affects the lives of many characters and leads them to feel estranged from themselves. Abdullah and Pari have a great fond of each other that is why their separation would leave a great impact on Abdullah's life. After the separation, Abdullah finds no meaning of staying in Shadbagh. This excerpt from the novel may clarify the situation well.

His days in Shadbagh were numbered, like Shuja's. He knew this now. There was nothing left for him here. He had no home here. He would wait until winter passed and the spring thaw set in, and he would rise one morning before dawn and he would step out the door. He would choose a direction and he would begin to walk. He would walk as far from Shadbagh as his feet would take him. (Hosseini, 2013, p. 31)

Abdullah is in his own home and village physically but spiritually is not there because after Pari nothing left for him to give a meaning to his life in Shadbagh. For someone to feel estranged or alienated it is not required always to go exile, when nothing connects you to your home even, you experience this feeling of alienation just like Abdullah. Now he is just passing time to pass winter. After that he would go away from Shadbagh, the village of past experience with Pari, to somewhere in the world. Where he would go, is not important from him as he just wants to 'walk as far from Shadbagh as his feet would take him.' Abdullah is under the effect of the separation after many years. When we see him at the end of the novel, we find out that he still remembers Pari and named his only daughter Pari as a remembrance of her daughter

### Conclusion

Alienation is one of the most controversial concepts in our history of literature and it has as many definitions as the number of social sciences. Most of the definitions agree on that, alienation is a social-psychological state of human beings in which the person feels alienated or estranged from society, culture, things, fellow men, and even himself. Seeman (1959) in his article, *On the Meaning of Alienation*, formulated a theoretical framework that can be used by researchers to study sociological tendencies and apply on novels. The five variants of alienation are (powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement). Khalid Hussein treated the phenomenon in his work, *And the Mountains Echoed*, very well and it is one of the main themes of the novel. Hussein illustrates how this feeling of alienation would affect the lives of the characters. His novel is mainly about separation and it is the source of alienation of the characters. The separation of Abdullah and Pari is the heart and core of the separations and it influences most of the characters in a way. Characters in the novel like (Abdullah, Saboor, Baba Ayub, Nila, and Mr. Wahdati) in a way experience a form of alienation. Their experience of alienation results in changing their behavior and their lives forever. To feel alienated or experience this feeling, it is not always required to be in exile, sometimes like, Abdullah, you are at home but you find no real and meaningful connection with your home or surrounding.

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