

Sea Prayer: An Illustrated Narrative of Refugee Crisis by Khaled Hosseini

Halima Bee

Sankalp Senior Secondary School, Brahmapur, Odisha.

Abstract

The implications of wars are much more than mere statistics. People, who are not actively involved in conflicts bear the brunt of its consequences. Refugees who face difficulties even after exiting the combat zone have thoroughly chronicled the repercussions. Victims of war have created their canon of literature. It has been a decade since the Syrian Civil War began. People fleeing the conflict often undertake perilous journeys, endangering their own and their loved ones' lives. The following study analyzes Khaled Hosseini's illustrative novel *Sea Prayer*—a dedication to the horrific refugee crisis. The purpose of this study is to illustrate the importance of literature in forming people's opinions. It also refutes the notion that these stories solely evoke empathy in their readers. Instead, it seeks people's acceptance and compassion for their predicament.

Keywords: Empathy, Refugees, *Sea Prayer*, Syrian Civil War.

Introduction and Background Study

Wars are inevitable, so are their consequences. On the one hand, war is usually among two or more different sections of society; on the other hand, its reverberations are felt by all and sundry. It ruins people, their properties, their loved ones and their homes. The world underwent severe wars innumerable times in history; the losses that humanity faced is irreparable. Millions of people get displaced during the wars. Mass migration takes place. People flee to safety. According to the UN report, the last time, the world witnessed such massive catastrophic events was during World War II. The world is again a witness to such inhumane incidents where the victims are survivors of the Civil War.

In 2011, amidst the growing unrest during the Arab Spring, the Arab Republic of Syria saw an outbreak of dissent and protest from few oppositions of President Bashar-al-Assad. Gradually, this protest turned into one of the ugliest Civil War, the world ever witnessed. It involved almost all the superpowers of the world, for instance, the USA, Russia and Turkey. Unfortunately, the sufferers were again innocent civilians who escaped the combat zone after their homes destroyed in the act of violence. They either migrated to safer zones within their country or out of it. Almost half of the pre-war population of 22 million got displaced during the Civil War. Such mass exodus was the highest after the Second World War as per the UN Reports. According to the statistics presented by UNHCR—the UN Refugee Agency, the total estimate of global forced displacement has surpassed 80 million in mid-2020. Out of which nearly 26 million are refugees—half of them are under the age of 18. The highest number of refugees come from Syria—the UNHCR statistics reports them around 6.6 million. The migrating masses often take unusual migratory routes to flee the war, persecution, and other atrocities. These migratory routes also include the notably perilous sea.

On 2 September 2015, a three-year-old boy was found washed ashore on the shores of Bodrum, Turkey. A Turkish journalist Nilufer Demir took the photograph of the boy with his face downturned. Later, media identified him as Alan Kurdi, a Syrian boy of Kurdish origin whose family left his country to seek refuge in Turkey from where they were trying to move to Europe. The photograph made global headlines and drew the notice of millions of people worldwide to the issue of the ever-escalating refugee crisis and their plight. The reports from several media outlets highlighted that it was not the first of such incidents. The refugees often took ferry or rubber boats through the Mediterranean Sea route to reach the 'Fortress Europe' where they are generally not welcomed. On many occasions, these boats capsize that kills people even before they reach their destination. Alan Kurdi was escaping through one such boat that unfortunately capsized after few minutes

* Corresponding Author: E-mail: beehalima95@gmail.com • Mobile No. 9337604106

of leaving the shore. His tiny body laid on the beach called for an immediate response from the people in power to the plight of refugees.

Khaled Hosseini is an Afghan-American novelist whose debut novel *The Kite Runner* touches upon the subject of the uprooted people. Like the protagonist Amir, Hosseini also left Afghanistan and eventually settled in the USA. His father was a diplomat who lived in Iran and France for some time. They were not able to return to Afghanistan because of the Soviet invasion. Instead, they sought political asylum in the USA, where he received his degree in medicine and started practicing as a medical practitioner. He was only eleven years old when he came to the USA and thirty-eight when he went back to Afghanistan. In his interviews, he admitted that he has lived as a refugee in his initial days in California. As a Goodwill Envoy and Ambassador to UNHCR, he is working to re-establish the once uprooted and displaced citizens of Afghanistan. *Sea Prayer* is his fourth published work after *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, and *As the Mountains Echoed*.

The *Sea Prayer* is a remarkably short book, published in 2018, illustrated with mesmerising watercolor strokes by UK-based illustrator Dan Williams. Its publication commemorated the third death anniversary of Kurdi. The same novel was earlier brought into the public domain as a Virtual Reality experience in partnership with 'The Guardian' and was uploaded on their YouTube Channel on 2 September 2017, the second death anniversary of Alan Kurdi. Hosseini recalls his inspiration to write *Sea Prayer* in a documentary film titled *Desperate Journeys*:

Like millions of people around the world, when I saw that picture of Alan Kurdi lying lifeless, face down on a beach in Turkey, my heart was shattered ... that image was seared into my mind... (00:42-1:00).

Hosseini in *Desperate Journey* also mentions that the *Sea Prayer* is a dedication to all the refugees who try hard to seek a life of respect and dignity elsewhere in the world away from their tormented home. Moreover, he also wanted to share "the stories of refugees who are driven to desperate measures ... many of whom end up perishing at sea trying to reach a life of dignity and safety" (00:58-1:39).

The novel presents the perspective of a father who is also a victim of the war. It is in the form of a letter from a father to a son. The father speaks to his young sleeping child on the eve of their escape from the combat zone. He recalls all the good old days he spent in his home in Homs. He is comparing and contrasting his childhood with the childhood of his son. The voyage they are about to set on leads them to an unknown future in a foreign land.

The present paper is an endeavor to find how literature can be the most effective medium to depict reality. The research will also argue whether the literature on refugees is produced only to invoke empathy or does it have any substantial contribution to make their life better. Generally, the refugee and migration literature probe the theme of trauma undergone by the characters due to the displacement to make the readers more compassionate towards their sufferings. However, the present paper intends to deviate from the trend and explore the psyche of the character. For this purpose, the research will evaluate the recollections of the past from the cognisance of the protagonist. It will also decipher, the fear of the uncertainties of the future that the character envisaged throughout the novel. The entire narrative is the recollection of the blissful past and contemplation of the unknown future. The paper by no means defines nostalgia as homesickness; instead, it compares the present and the past with the unknown future. The study will further highlight the dangerous migratory routes people undertook to protect themselves from persecution and atrocities. Also, it would further acquaint the readers with facts and figures on what lies ahead in their 'desperate journeys' to Europe and other host lands.

Literature Review

Literature mirrors society: It has the power to change the general discourse around any subject. Writers across the centuries depicted their world and its problems through words. It is the prerogative of the writer to portray reality without any bias. As many countries are involved in wars of all sorts, the increase in the refugee literature is apparent. The onslaught of such terrible circumstances keeps producing literary gems. In the past, when the world underwent the deadliest wars ever fought, lost innumerable lives, left many crippled, and almost engulfed the whole of the world with it, that was the moment when survivors came up with their accounts of it. They produced what later came to be known as 'War Literature'. Those were the narratives of survival, displacement and reestablishment that gave us glimpses of those years. The world today is again witnessing such terrible events where men are killed, persecuted and left homeless. Novels and memoirs

like *The Girl Who Smiled Beads* by Clemantine Wamariya and Elizabeth Weil, *Call Me American* by Abidi Nor Iftin, *Enrique's Journey* by Sonia Nazario, *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes* by Atia Abawi, *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid, and *In the Sea There Are Crocodiles* by Fabio Geda, are powerful narratives from the refugees and survivors of war and displacement.

Refugee literature is a vast arena where refugees have enriched its reserve enormously. Some scholars reckon that the refugee literature is principally for Western readers who never endured the same trauma. They also believe that this is to produce pity in the reader and feed the concept of elitism in them. Bayan-Al-Ammouri, in her work, *Privatizing Refugees' Human Rights* in Hamid's *Exit West*, Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus*, and Hosseini's *Sea Prayer* testifies the writer of manifesting the empathy inducing side of the account to the reader. Her evaluation accuses the author of deliberately trying to deprive the victims of fundamental human rights and not paying any heed to the original topic of discussion. On the contrary, other scholars think that it is of utmost importance to show the anguish and agony of sufferers so that the world can do something for them.

According to Naghibi, Rifkind and Ty, the production of graphic life narratives concerning the traumatic experience of refugees, displaced, and migrants have increased many folds. They have listed several contributors to the discourse of refugees available as graphic life narratives, namely; Marjane Satrapi's canonical and autobiographical *Persepolis*, Kate Evan's *Threads from the Refugee Crisis*, Joe Sacco's reportage in *Palestine*, etc. (296-297). The novel *Sea Prayer* is not exactly a graphical representation. However, it does describe the refugee crisis in pictorial form. The illustrations speak volumes about the trauma in the discourse. It presents and aids the narrative in truth and beauty.

The presence of illustration creates more empathy in readers in comparison to plain text. The researcher Amanda Zilla claims Visual Representation and its use in "the storytelling of fictionalised migrant narratives can evoke an emotional response from users and thereby reduce xenophobic attitudes and increase empathy towards migrants and migrant issues such as geographic displacement ..." (154). The choice of a father as narrator, in her opinion, elicited the most sympathetic response from the readers. The hope with which the father migrates— the hope of protecting his child from war and violence—incites pity for the character. She also appears to believe that VR makes it possible for refugees to endure traumatic moments, which can induce negative emotional states. However, she firmly believes that people who have never been in those circumstances, on the other hand, have developed empathy, which will be beneficial if they are considerate in their attitude toward the displaced and those in need of shelter. She claims that Hosseini created awareness about the refugees through his work among people that will turn the tide for their betterment.

Contrarily, Bayan-Al-Ammouri approach to examine the novel was entirely different. Some fictions, according to her, enhance the 'elitism' and 'exclusiveness' of Western readers by depicting the refugees, oppressed and exploited. It makes Westerners build the imagined empathy. She accuses Hosseini of catering for this demand. According to her, *Sea Prayer* is an example of a "sentimental readjustment program", "it is about refugees, but not for refugees", and its narrative strips the refugees of their fundamental human rights. She further claims that the reason for excluding refugees from the discourse of human rights and labelling them as victims serves the purpose of seeking empathy for them. Surprisingly, she praises the epistolary style of the novel as it intends to give complete autonomy to the character and its depiction. However, she also censures the writer for monetizing and capitalizing on the death of little Alan Kurdi. She states that no dedication can compensate for the loss. She further argues that though the narrative is gripping, yet "the dedication and inscription at the end and on the back cover of the book are more extensive than the text itself" (218).

Furthermore, AlAmmouri asserts that focusing on the individual problem and confining the whole scenario to one real-life narrative provides no help to the victim. It only makes the reader situate themselves in that place and she termed this entire phenomenon as 'privatization'. Also, she claims that the experiences of refugees and the general readers, are different. Instead of making their ordeals more apparent, it's time to "concentrate on increasing the readers knowledge about the various factors, processes, and behaviors that would facilitate the actualization of refugees' human rights" (220).

Discussion

The introductory line to the novel is enough to awake the memory of Alan Kurdi. The epistolary fiction starts with the father uttering, 'My dear Marwan' (Hosseini, 2018), to the child sleeping in his arms on the

night of their retreating from their homeland. The father, then, recollects the happy memories of his childhood in Homs and compares it with the Marwan's, who only saw the horrors of the draconian battle. Here is the first instance in the novel where the nostalgic past is juxtaposed with the glaring present. He further describes the panorama of his homestead. He outlines an artistic picture of the mornings, the grandmother with her bleating goats, the rustling leaves of the olive trees, and a faint rim of persimmon noticeable in the eastward sky with his words. Dan Williams painted these nostalgic revisits using bright hues of greens splattered around the field, red flowers and clear blue sky with fluffy clouds floating in it.

The father also reminisces about her wife from the trip when they both brought Marwan to Homs for the first time while he was still a toddler. He says, "I have a sharply etched memory of your mother from that trip ..." (Hosseini, 2018). He grieves that his child does not remember the place as he does. Owing to his age, Marwan would have disremembered 'the farmhouse' and 'the soot of its stone walls'. Hosseini's narrator next took us to his Homs—a 'Bustling Old City', where people lived in harmony with their neighbors, irrespective of their religion and faith. He is sorrowful that his son does not remember the evening walk, he took with his mother around the clock tower square. Zilla, within her paper, '*Khaled Hosseini's Sea Prayer: Virtual Storytelling*' and '*User-Response*' in '*Fictionalized Migrant Narrative*', describes the character of the father as 'every refugee' who faces immense pain leaving those memories behind in his homeland. The pain and trauma of leaving home are portrayed through the nostalgic visit to the past—where he cannot return and which his son doesn't remember. He wishes that he could remember the city of Homs as it was before the war. The dismay of the father is clearly evident when he says, "But that life, that time, seems like a distant dream now, even to me, like some long-dissolved rumour" (Hosseini, 2018).

The father, in his further reflection, narrates incidents from the tormented past. He recounts how the protests transitioned into the siege, how the air strikes made sky spit bombs, and how the violence, destruction, and brutality led the people to starvation and death. He declares that Marwan remembers crater forming in the ground after bomb blasts and people hiding in rubbles. As previously stated, the reader is repeatedly shown the enormous suffering of the refugees by comparing the past to the present. The father laments how the serene and blissful past has given way to a terrible and perilous present. Al-Ammouri approaches this topic with the argument that the world is already aware of the migrants' plight. She further argues that the writers, nonetheless, prefer to exaggerate on the disaster that has robbed them of the dignity to live like others. However, such findings failed to address the increased knowledge among those who were previously unaware of the situation.

To further substantiate the migrants' plight, Hosseini addressed compelling arguments concerning their futures and inclusion. On the eve of their escape, the father-son duo is waiting for the boat similar to thousands of other refugees from diverse nationalities and ethnicities. The author, here in this instance, made the narrative more general from specific. He stresses that irrespective of their diversity, they still share the same psyche, maybe, the same future as well. Everyone in that 'moonlit beach' is in search of a home. Everyone is terrorized by the violence and seeking peace in some distant land away from gunshots and blood. The narrator, however, realized that the future is as uncertain as their life. He discerned the truth, and declares: "We are the uninvited. We are the unwelcome. We should take our misfortune elsewhere" (Hosseini, 2018).

Hosseini lay down the grim reality in these sentences. The displaced masses have nowhere to go. Reports say that there are very few developed nations that admit migrants. The account of refugees detained in several countries has overwhelmed the media platforms. Refugees, sometimes, are not allowed to traverse the perimeter to enter the host lands. If spanned, the rampant xenophobia does not let them be the inclusive part of the new culture of the new land. Hosseini, in '*Desperate Journeys*', travels and meet refugees in Lebanon and Italy. The survivors who are in Lebanon never crossed the sea though their loved ones did. However, refugees in Italy had reached their destination via a sea voyage across the Mediterranean Sea. Multitudes of refugees die in transit and buried in a foreign land with no mark on their mounds. The European and American nations are not welcoming even to the asylum seekers, let alone illegal immigrants. Former American President Donald Trump passed several policies on wielding the influx of refugees. He cut down the entry of asylum seekers in the USA drastically compared to his predecessor Barack Obama. Following the suit, Australian and European governments also started detaining the refugees on their borders. Meanwhile, Turkey and Germany have opened their frontiers for the sufferers of war. AlAmmouri, notwithstanding her powerful argument, neglected to give incentives for this xenophobic stance towards refugees. Also, Hosseini and other

writers writing for humane purpose fall short of proffering any significant hope to the victims. They remain an outcast.

For the first time, the narrator's monologue in *Sea Prayer* is interrupted by the sound of his spouse in his consciousness when he tells Marwan:

But I hear your mother's voice, over the tide,
and she whispers in my ear, 'Oh, but if they saw, my darling.
Even half of what you have.

If only they saw.

They would say kinder things, surely' (Hosseini, 2018).

The narrator could hear his wife's comforting voice through the uncertainty of the future, which was tinged with dread and hope. He needs acceptance in the host nation to contribute and to avoid prejudice, hostility, and intolerance. People must grasp the situation in order for this acceptance to be realized. The author is looking for opportunities for his character, not just empathy. AlAmmouri, however, makes no attempt to determine the underlying causes of empathy stimulation in the Western readers. In the next passage, the father tries to pacify his son by assuring him that nothing will happen if he holds his hands. Albeit, he concedes that he is defenseless in the face of the mighty ocean. He has no solution except to pray. He hopes the boat reaches at its destination safely. He also believes that the sea is aware that he is carrying his beloved son through it.

Were his prayers heard? Did they make it to the safety of land? The reader's perspective determines the responses to these questions. The father concludes his prayer with the phrase 'Inshallah', which translates as 'If God wills'. The following narrative is a set of illustrations by Dan Williams that shows a boat in the heaving waves, the eagles soaring up in the sky, and a beach where the mortal remains are visible as a speck in the golden sand. Whether they arrived alive or dead is an open-ended question posed to the readers.

The entire narrative is not just a letter from a father to his son. It is a whole range of emotions set forth by the beautiful and insightful illustrations accompanying the text. They say what is left unsaid by the author. The trauma and agony are painted in watercolor that makes the narrative more appealing. All of this certainly evokes empathy in readers, but it also prompts them to be apprehensive about their past, present, and future. The author intends to bring the predicament of refugees to global attention in the hope that the world would renounce its xenophobic and racist attitude toward them and acknowledge their need for psychological, sociological, and economic development.

Conclusion

The Syrian refugee crisis is alarming even after a decade of war and terror. Chiefly, the conditions of children are pathetic. More and more people are taking challenging yet desperate migratory routes to escape persecution and other war crimes. The people reaching European nations and America are by large disappointed. The widespread xenophobia and discrimination is a matter of concern. Some authors are striving to build important works that reflect the refugee discourse, not just on their hardship but also on the much-needed acknowledgement and growth opportunities. Literature may not have an immediate effect on people. However, there is a strong possibility that the situation will improve in the long term. The study reflected on previous researches that argued that the novel created uproar on one particular incident to seek empathy and capitalisation. The current analysis of *Sea Prayer* cemented its stance on the intention of the novel. This new understanding of the novel should aid in anticipating the influence of the literature on readers and their eventual views toward migrants.

Works Cited

- AlAmmouri, Bayan. "Privatizing Refugees' Human Rights in Hamid's Exit West, Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus*, and Hosseini's *Sea Prayer*." *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 2020, pp. 205-22. *Google Scholar*, doi:10.33806/ijaes2000.20.2.11.
- "Arab Spring." *HISTORY*, www.history.com/topics/middle-east/arab-spring. Accessed 17 May 2021.
- Hosseini, Khaled. *Sea Prayer*, United States, Riverhead Books, 2018.
- "Khaled Hosseini – Desperate Journeys." *YouTube*, uploaded by UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, 3 Sept. 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=njvcX0NXRh8.

Sea Prayer: An Illustrated Narrative of Refugee Crisis by Khaled Hosseini

- Murphy-Oates, Laura. "Australia New Powers to Indefinitely Detain Refugees", *The Guardian*, 18 May 2021, www.theguardian.com/australia-news/audio/2021/may/19/australias-new-powers-to-indefinitely-detain-refugees.
- Naghbi, Nima *et al.* "Migration, Exile, and Diaspora in Graphic Life Narratives." *A/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2020, pp. 295–304. *Taylor and Francis Online*, doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2020.1738081.
- Reporter, Guardian Staff. "Why Fiction Can Help Us Understand the Syrian Refugee Crisis", *The Guardian*, 20 Sept. 2017, www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2015/sep/08/fiction-refugee-crisis-gillian-cross.
- "Sea Prayer: A 360 Illustrated Film by Award-Winning Novelist Khaled Hosseini", *YouTube*, uploaded by The Guardian, 1 Sept. 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=LKBNEEY-c3s&t=16s.
- Shoukat, Laila *et al.* "An Analysis of Personal and Collective Trauma in Khaled Hosseini's Novel *Sea Prayer*", *JEE (Journal of English Education)*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2021, pp. 117-30. *Google Scholar*, doi:10.30606/jee.v6i2.457.
- Smith, Helena. "Shocking Images of Drowned Syrian Boy Show Tragic Plight of Refugees", *The Guardian*, 26 Mar. 2019, www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/02/shocking-image-of-drowned-syrian-boy-shows-tragic-plight-of-refugees.
- The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Syrian Civil War | Facts & Timeline", *Encyclopædia Britannica*, www.britannica.com/event/Syrian-Civil-War. Accessed 17 May 2021.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. "Figures at a Glance", *UNHCR*, www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html. Accessed 5 May 2021.
- Zilla, Amanda. "Khaled Hosseini's *Sea Prayer* : Virtual Storytelling And 'User- Response' in Fictionalized Migrant Narrative", *Radical (Dis)Engagement: State–Society–Religion (Off Campus: Seggau School of Thought, 6)*, Edited by Murray Forman, Erlis Laçej, Frederick Reinprecht, and Kim Sawchuk., 2020, pp. 154–166. *Google Scholar*, doi:10.25364/25.6:2020.12.