



**Research Paper**

## **Prayers of Refugees**

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The appalling photo of a dead migrant father and his less than two-year-old daughter lying face down in the gloomy waters on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande evoked a numbing memory of another tragedy that had made the global headlines four years ago. The iconic image of Alan Kurdi lying face down in the sand on Turkey shore had triggered a dramatic upsurge in global concern over the refugee crisis. *Sea Prayer* is the fictional representation of Alan Kurdi's tragedy written by Khaled Hosseini, one of the most widely read and beloved authors of the day. The novel was published in 2017 in the wake of commemorating the second anniversary of Alan's fatal death.

Khaled Hosseini, the author of *The Kite Runner*, has been the Goodwill Envoy to the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) since 2006 and the founder of The Khaled Hosseini Foundation. Being a refugee himself, Hosseini's writings largely depict the vulnerabilities of the refugees and the sobering experiences of the victims of humanitarian crises. *The Kite Runner* beautifully but powerfully illustrates the deadly experiences of becoming an Afghan refugee in a post-Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. His other two novels also expose the pains and the agonies of displaced people. *Sea Prayer* is his new literary venture that vividly reflects upon the danger in perilous sea-crossing which has become an inevitable chance in the survival of a refugee.

A refugee is a person who is fleeing life-threatening conditions. Civil war, violence, and persecutions have accelerated the growth in the number of refugee productions in Middle East nations. Since the inception of the Syrian Civil War, the Middle East has witnessed the flow of a mammoth number of displaced people who are in search of a better life condition in European as well as American nations. There is a surge of literary productions that poignantly deal with the desperate plights of the refugee community. Refugee literature largely addresses the issue of political unrest, displacement, the question of identity and national security, and the risks involved in being a refugee. *Exit West* written by Mohsin Hamida, *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes* by journalist turned novelist Atia Abawi and *The Silence and the Roar* by Nihad Sirees are a few novels that vividly translate the real experiences of Syrian refugee crisis into literature.

*Sea Prayer* is a short piece of fiction with a powerful language. Written in verse, the novel is composed in the form of a letter from a father to his beloved son on the eve of their desperate sea journey. Marwan is lying on the lap of his affectionate but desperate Syrian father. Before stepping into the brink of the disaster with the dearest ones, the father tells his soul-stirring memories of childhood to his son. This reminiscence renders to the readers a sharp contrast between the pre- and post-civil war Syrian life. In the first half of the novel, he recalls that the life in the city of Homs was, once, tranquil; embellished with 'the stirring of olive trees', 'beating of goats' and 'the clanking of cooking pots.' The farms were filled with the herd of cows and the wildflowers. His beautiful memories of social as well as political harmony that had existed in Homs city prompts him to wish his son also had remembered them. But Marwan is unlucky to do so as the Homs he knows is a different world.

The second half of the novel sketches out war-torn Syria. Now, the tranquility of Homs city seems to be a mere dream to the father. Starvation replaced the farming, and the farmlands transformed into a burial land. Instead of clanking, one can now hear the terrible sounds of the bombing. Marwan knows only the darkness; the darkness of blood and death. Towards the end of the novel, the father who was once a citizen of Syria identifies himself as a refugee. Like any other runaway refugees from war-torn countries like Eritrea, Afghan, Iraq, Somalia and Libya, Marwan's father is also about to embark on his precarious journey to find a new homeland.

Hosseini caricatures the desolate experience of becoming a displaced person/community. Displaced people are treated as unwelcome/uninvited guests in foreign lands. So the hope for finding a peaceful life is unimaginable in the case of a refugee. There is none to listen to the cries of the children, the worries of the

mothers and the helplessness of the fathers. However, Marwan's father is giving a false sense of hope to his son and praying for the best.

Hosseini has employed the verse novel as a diverse postmodern genre to give an experience of refugee life in a deeper sense. The novel draws on the technical aspects of poetry such as imagery, metaphors and standard metrical pattern to transcend the literal and leave an emotional imprint on the readers. Written in a series of short poems linked by topic, character, and plot, the novelist encourages the reader to proceed linearly, eventually incorporating the destituteness of the refugeedom. Hosseini has patterned the writing of this novel after an everyday speech to attract the attention of the readers of any age. Written in a poetic singular voice, each poem is emotionally dense and powerfully imaginative. The author provokes the global community to stand together to resolve this grave humanitarian concern.

Through fictionalizing the tragic death of Alan, Hosseiniposits a lot of questions towards the clumsy responses of the international community to refugee emergencies. The novel as a genre has been adopted by him as an alternative discourse to intervene in the indifferent political stands of global powers towards the refugee crisis.

The novel is more of a picture book adorned with the fascinating water colour paintings by London based artist Dan Williams. The novel has been transformed into a virtual reality project published by the Guardian made in collaboration with UNHCR.

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