



Narratives of Displacement: Memory, Trauma, and Exile in Khaled Hosseini's *Sea Prayer*

¹Ms. Sindhuja D & ²Dr. Karthika Premkumar

1. Ph.D Research Scholar, Reg. no: 21223154012017, Department of English, S.T. Hindu College, Nagercoil. (Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli – 627 012, Tamil Nadu, India.)

Email- devadhassindhuja@gmail.com

2. Associate Professor and Head (SS), Department of English, S.T. Hindu College, Nagercoil, (Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli – 627 012, Tamil Nadu, India)

Received: 7-03-2023

Accepted: 20-04-2023

Published: 21-05-2023

Abstract

Sea Prayer (2018) by Khaled Hosseini is an illustrative novella that conveys the refugee experience, highlighting the themes of memory, loss, and displacement. The book was written in response to the tragic death of Alan Kurdi, a young Syrian refugee child who had undergone a perilous journey across the sea. It is composed in verse and is a form of a letter from a father to his beloved son. In the letter, the father recalls their lost home while confronting the harsh realities of exile. The paper examines the exploration of forced migration, trauma and nostalgia, analysing how Hosseini portrays exile as a personal and collective tragedy. Ultimately, *Sea Prayer* acts as both a lament and a plea to humanise the refugees, showcasing literature's role in addressing contemporary humanitarian crises.

Keywords: Displacement, Exile, Memory, Trauma

Introduction

Khaled Hosseini is an Afghan-American novelist and physician, born in Kabul, Afghanistan. He is well-known for his novels that explore the themes of war, family, and exile. He has written four books: *The Kite Runner* (2003), *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013), and *Sea Prayer* (2018). His internationally recognised novels have been adapted into films and stage plays. In 2006, Hosseini was appointed as a Goodwill Envoy for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). His humanitarian efforts are reflected in Khaled Hosseini's Foundation, which supports Afghan refugees and displaced communities.

Andrew E. Shacknové defines a refugee as “a person fleeing life-threatening conditions” (274). The novel, *Sea Prayer* (2018), is a short, illustrated narrative inspired by the Syrian refugee crisis. It captures the harsh realities of forced displacement. Unlike his other novels, this illustrated book is written as a poetic monologue. It portrays a father's farewell to his homeland and his plea for his son's survival. The novel is deeply influenced by the real-life refugee tragedy of the death of Alan Kurdi, which explores how personal grief intertwines with the widespread trauma of displacement. Additionally, it examines how exile is portrayed through the complex relationships between memory, loss, and the enduring hope of refugees. In doing so, it contributes to the broader body of literature that seeks to represent and understand the experiences of refugees. The novel also serves as a silent protest against indifference. It highlights the inhumane treatment of refugees and the profound stigma they endure in their most vulnerable states, gently urging readers to consider the refugee crisis not as a political issue, but as a human one.

In the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, John Sutton's entry on memory opens by illustrating the inherent complexity of memory:

‘Memory’ labels a diverse set of cognitive capacities by which we retain information and reconstruct past experiences, usually for present purposes. Memory is one of the most important ways by which our histories animate our current actions and experiences. Most notably, the human ability to conjure up long-gone but specific episodes of our lives is both familiar and puzzling, and is a key aspect of personal identity. Memory seems to be a source of knowledge. We remember experiences and events which are not happening now, so memory differs from perception. We remember events which really happened, so memory is unlike pure imagination. Yet in practice, there can be close interactions between remembering, perceiving, and imagining. (1)

Memory plays a central and influential role in *Sea Prayer*, as the narrator, a father speaking to his son, recalls vivid memories of their homeland, Homs, Syria, before the outbreak of war. He fondly remembers the beauty of his hometown, the peaceful evenings under the stars, and the simple pleasures of daily life. He used to stroll with his wife, his son perched on his shoulders, savouring ordinary moments that now feel distant and surreal. However, everything changed when war engulfed their city. The familiar streets turned into ruins, homes were destroyed, and bombings and cries of despair replaced the sounds of laughter. Now, the father and his three-year-old son, Marwan have left their homeland, along with numerous other people who are also leaving their native land in search of their safe future.

The Mediterranean Sea crossing is depicted as a haunting journey of fear, uncertainty, and desperation. The father is acutely aware of how fragile their voyage is, knowing that the unforgiving sea has claimed countless lives. The waves seem to whisper the silent prayers of everyone brave enough to attempt the crossing. The sea itself is a paradox, shimmering with hope while also concealing the threat of death. The waves seem to murmur the silent prayers of those who dare to cross. They drift into the unknown, surrounded by others carrying their own sorrow and longing, they drift into the unknown. The biting cold, suffocating darkness, and overcrowded, flimsy boat make the journey even more treacherous. Still, it's their only way forward, a desperate escape from despair toward a faint promise of safety.

The journey across the Mediterranean Sea is a harrowing experience, fraught with fear, uncertainty, and desperation. The father is deeply conscious of how fragile their voyage is, knowing that the merciless sea has claimed countless lives. The waves seem to murmur the silent prayers of everyone who dares to cross. The vast expanse of water is a paradox: it shimmers with hope on the surface, yet conceals the shadow of death beneath it. They drift into the unknown, surrounded by others who also carry the heavy burdens of sorrow and longing. The journey is made even more dangerous by the bitter cold, the suffocating darkness, and the overcrowded, unstable boat. Still, this voyage remains their only path forward, a desperate escape from despair toward the distant promise of safety. Through this crossing, the narrative tenderly reveals the vulnerability of displaced lives and their painful choices in their unwavering search for dignity and survival. In this context, nostalgia preserves identity amidst the hardships of forced migration.

The renowned scholar Svetlana Boym, in her work *The Future of Nostalgia*, describes nostalgia as:

Nostalgia... is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship. A cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images- of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life. The moment we try to force it into a single image, it breaks the frame or burns the surface. (13)

In this novel, the transition from memory to reality illustrates the psychological distress caused by displacement. Refugees' grief is not only because of the deaths of their loved ones but also due to the loss of their homes, customs, and histories, which they had to abandon. The narrator, a father, reflects on his son Marwan's fate as they prepare to flee their war-torn homeland. He reminisces about Syria before the conflict, recalling it as a place of tranquillity, beauty, and love, now lost to devastation and despair. The narrator says, "My dear Marwan, in the long summers of childhood ... Of your grandfather's farmhouse outside of Homs" (1). The above line explains the father's reminisces. He also tells about the fond memories of his son's childhood, recalling the days he spent playing in the countryside, observing the bustling market streets, and feeling the support of his family and the community. The nostalgic recollections soon faded by the effects of war, which brought a harsh return to reality. Hosseini explains, "Your mother is here tonight, Marwan, with us, on this cold and moonlit beach ... All of us in search of home" (29). The line metaphorically suggests that everyone is searching for shelter. The father vividly describes the devastation of their home, and he also laments by saying that they are unwelcome and uninvited because of the isolation and rejection faced by displacement. Hosseini portrays exile as a profoundly personal tragedy for the father and son, and the collective tragedy reflects countless displaced people's experiences.

The father reflects upon his unforgettable memories with his young son, especially the calm mornings spent in their village, where the breeze softly moved through the olive trees. These memories, however, trouble him, as they sharply contrast with the harsh realities of their current displacement. The flow of his thoughts links memory with storytelling, blending past events with narration. The father regrets that his son, still too young, cannot remember their old home—the farmhouse with its dirty, blackened stone walls, the stream, and their peaceful life in Homs. These memories offer him emotional support, helping him survive the trauma of the present. Sadly, young Marwan is too young to have these cherished memories. The father wants his son to remember the peaceful times in Homs, a place of religious harmony and community where he and his wife once strolled around Clock Tower Square. But that peaceful past is gone. The Clock Tower has since become a symbol of anti-regime resistance, and the father's memories of a calm past now feel like an unattainable dream. The narrator shows how, after enduring such displacement and profound loss, time and life have become fleeting and hard to grasp.

The novel powerfully illustrates the profound trauma experienced by refugees, particularly those displaced by the ongoing Syrian conflict. The narrator contrasts beautiful memories of the past with the harsh realities of the present, which reflects the persistent trauma that haunts displaced Syrians. These memories evoke a sense of loss and longing for a life before the destruction and chaos of war. As the narrative unfolds, the depiction of the civil war underscores the psychological scars carried by refugees, who are haunted by the constant threat of violence and destruction. The imagery of "the skies spitting bombs" captures the terrifying and unpredictable nature of their daily existence, while "starvation" and "burials" serve as grim reminders of the war's devastating toll on families and communities. Instead of playing and enjoying their childhood, children are portrayed as playing in "bomb craters" that have become twisted substitutes for a swimming hole. This stark image highlights the brutal reality faced by the younger generation, whose innocence is stolen by the violence and destruction that surrounds them. The novel powerfully communicates the deep emotional and psychological wounds carried by those displaced by war, offering a poignant look into the lives of refugees.. The author poignantly captures the pain of exile and the immense losses they have undergone due to the Syrian war. The novel also pays tribute to those who have lost their lives and homes as a result of displacement. By intertwining the themes of memory, trauma, and displacement, the novel fosters empathy and challenges the readers to embrace the role in promoting social consciousness.

Works Cited

1. Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. Basic Books, 2001.
2. Hosseini, Khaled. *Sea Prayer*. Riverhead Books, 2018.
3. Shacknove, Andrew E. "Who Is a Refugee." *Ethics*. The University of Chicago Press, vol. 95, no. 2, Jan., 1985, pp. 274 - 284.
5. Sutton, John. "Memory." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Eds. Edward N. Zalta, Uri Nodelman, and Colin Allen. Spring, 2010.
6. https://johnsutton.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/2010_sutton_memory_stanford_encyclopedia-1.pdf