

Homeless yet Hopeful: An Evaluation of the Expatriates in Khaled Hosseini's Sea Prayer

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Abstract

A refugee is a person who is dislocated due to persecution, war, conflict, violence, or human rights violations. The pain of non-acceptance, homelessness, seeking asylum are the known facts of refugees and migrants. Only a refugee himself can understand the agony behind the term. Khaled Hosseini is no stranger to the word 'refugee', as he is the prime example of immigrant leadership in the United States of America. His family sought political asylum in the U.S. in 1970s, when he was eleven years old. Though he is a doctor by profession, his inquisitiveness has turned him to be a writer. He has four books to his credit. His works swivel around Afghanistan, being a refugee, homeland, family, war, women, etc. Being an immigrant, he provides wonderful illustration of current refugee crisis in his recent short book called Sea Prayer. He dedicates this book to the thousands of refugees who have perished at sea fleeing war and persecution. This paper speculates the twinge and throbbing of refugees and also their anticipation to find a new home.

Keywords: dislocated, agony, homelessness, twinge, throbbing.

Even heaven is not home, quotes Khaled Hosseini from a Syrian refugee. Serenity and sanctuary are the two words that do not exist in a refugee's dictionary. A refugee is a person who is dislocated due to persecution, war, conflict, violence, or human rights violations. The pain of non-acceptance, being homeless, seeking asylum are the known facts of refugees and migrants. Wherever they are, they long for their homeland. Rohingyas, Syrians, Iranians, Somalians, Afghans and countless other refugees from different countries all have one thing in common: the pain of not being able to go back home and be reunited with their families, because of war. They are obliged to leave their homeland in order to save their lives. They move on empty-handed, leaving behind everything they have, just because for their mere existence and the future of their children. Added to that, the non-acceptance and harsh judgements in their new-found home add fuel to the fire. Only a refugee himself can understand the agony behind the term.

Khaled Hosseini is no stranger to the word 'refugee', as he is the prime example of immigrant leadership in the United States of America. Being an Afghan-American, Khaled Hosseini was born in Kabul, Afghanistan, in the year 1965. His father was a diplomat in the Afghan Foreign Ministry and his mother was a teacher at a high school in Kabul. In 1976, the Foreign Ministry relocated the Hosseini family to Paris. They were ready to return to Kabul in 1980, but by then their homeland had witnessed a bloody communist coup and the invasion of the Soviet Army. The Hosseinis sought and were granted political asylum in the United States. Hosseini graduated from high school in 1984 and enrolled at Santa Clara University, where he earned a bachelor's degree in biology in 1988. The following year he entered the University of California,

San Diego, School of Medicine, where he earned a medical degree in 1993. After completing his career as a doctor for more than ten years, his passion for writing has turned him to be a writer of fiction. He has described his career as a doctor as something like an 'arranged marriage' hinting that the occupation is not necessarily chosen by him.

In recent times, Hosseini is one of the most recognized and best selling authors in the world. His books *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, and *And the Mountains Echoed* have been published over seventy countries and sold more than forty million copies worldwide. Always being an avid reader of old Persian poetry, Hosseini has received many positive reviews for his books. His works gyrate around Afghan culture, women, miseries, love, loss, forgiveness, revenge, conviction, and sanguinity. His characters are revolutionary representatives for the Afghan community. His novels induce emotions deep from the heart of the readers. USA Today states that Hosseini's writing makes our hearts ache, our stomachs clench, and our emotions reel. His recent short, yet powerful illustrated book *Sea Prayer*, is published in September 2018. The book is written in response to the current refugee crisis.

Hosseini is auspicious enough to leave Kabul in the 1980s. Otherwise he too would have been one among the millions of displaced Afghans today, the second largest refugee population after Syrians. The story of *Sea Prayer* was inspired by the story of Alan Kurdi, the three year old Syrian refugee boy who drowned in the Mediterranean sea, trying to reach safely in Europe in September 2014. In the year after Alan's death, four thousand one hundred and seventy six other died or went missing attempting similar journeys. This book is dedicated to the thousands of refugees who have perished at sea fleeing war and persecution. Dan William's illustrative paintings give life to Hosseini's writing. He is a London based artist. His images amplify the effect of the brief narrative.

Hosseini says in an interview in *The Hindu* that it is a powerful and tectonic event in one's life, to be uprooted and to restart life in a foreign country. Hosseini thinks of Alan Kurdi, the little Syrian boy, whose death became a global rallying cry at least for sometime. He imagines all the countless fathers who have been forced by war and persecution to make the agonising decision to put their loved ones aboard unsafe. He feels a personal connection to the plight of people who daily have to abandon home and community and flee for their lives. The deep-seated desire of the refugee is to go home. Hosseini has written *Sea Prayer* initially for a private fund-raising event for refugees in March 2017. He is given about five minutes to speak and he has decided to write something original rather than read from his books. He has thought immediately of Alan Kurdi, the little Syrian boy who drowned in the Mediterranean in 2015, and whose death has become a global rallying cry, at least for some time. He has imagined the anguish of Kurdi's father.

Hosseini says:

As a father myself, I imagined all the countless fathers who've been forced by war and persecution to make the agonising decision to put their loved ones aboard unsafe, unseaworthy boats and place the lives of their families in the hands of smugglers. The entire story, more or less as recreated now in *Sea Prayer*, came to be in one fell swoop over the course of an afternoon.

Hosseini is privileged unlike millions of Afghans who live in squalid refugee camps, to resettle in the U.S. when the Soviet war is broken out. So he is always reluctant to compare his circumstances to those of far less fortunate refugees around the world. But the experience of not being able to return home certainly influenced his decision to work with UNHCR. In 2006, the UNHCR have asked him to advocate for refugees, he has leapt at the chance because he has felt a personal connection to the plight of people who have to abandon home and community and flee for their lives. He considers it to be the most rewarding work of his life.

Sea Prayer is written in the form of a letter written by a frightened father to his sleeping son on the sea shore, as they wait along with others to board on the ship to Europe. The moving story opens with the father's reminiscence of the family's serene life in Homs, Syria, before the city was turned into a fatal war zone. Writing in the first person, Hosseini beautifully compares the father's Homs, a busy and lively city before the war, with the one his son has known, a devastated city known for bombings, starvation, and burials. The second part of the letter is a prayer for a safe journey. It is a powerful evocative plight of the displaced population, who undertake a journey known to be unsafe.

Afghans and Somalis and Iraqis and

Eritreans and Syrians.

All of us impatient for sunrise,

All of us in dread of it.

All of us in search of home.

I have heard it said we are the uninvited. (Sea Prayer)

We are the unwelcome.

We should take our misfortune elsewhere.

Through these lines, Hosseini propagates the pathetic plight of the refugees. They are not welcomed anywhere, always searching for a place to be called 'home'. Hosseini has given us an indication of what life must be like to live in a war-torn country, where times are perilous, lives are vulnerable and people live in dismay. The refugees face many kind of losses, such as loss of property, loss of loved ones, loss of dignity, loss of innocence and so on and so forth. Hosseini is no stranger to the life of a refugee, though his tribulations may not have been as same as Alan Kurdi's family. But 'Hope' is the only solution to prolong their lives. 'Heaven' even cannot be 'haven' for refugees.

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