

# ‘Journey’ as an Exodus: The Refugee Vamoose in Khaled Hosseini’s *Sea Prayer*

<sup>1</sup>Dona Maria Saju, <sup>2</sup>Rijo John

## **Abstract**

*The word ‘journey’ has several dimensions, especially in the current scenario infected with uncontrollable epidemics such as civil wars, nuclear threats, religious terrorism and so on. Its end result is millions of innocent people murdered and others left with nothing but their remaining life, looking expectantly at the world and its benevolence to provide them an abode. For these hopeless beings, journey is not a pleasure trip, but an exodus – a forced exile from one’s land, leaving behind everything, without even the hope that they will make it to the end. Several writers across the globe have reacted to the refugee crisis, but what singularises Khaled Hosseini’s *Sea Prayer* is its short, yet heart-breaking illustration of the current refugee crisis. It is in the form of a letter written by a father to his son on the eve of a journey through sea. The sea crossing is going to be dangerous and the father worries about his son, the greatest treasure of his life. The work is inspired by the unfortunate incident of Alan Kurdi, the three year old Syrian refugee child who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea, while trying to reach the safe shores of Europe, in September 2015. There is always some uncertainty in journeys. One may begin his/her journey, but reaching the destination is unsure. This is more so in the case of refugees. Also, they are uninvited people anywhere they go. The stories of their journey are accompanied by humiliation, rejection, insecurity and hopelessness. This article looks into the traumatic conditions of these people, who are often homogenously categorized as ‘refugees’, even though they come from different places and socio-economic and political backgrounds*

**Key Words** *Journey, Migration, Refugee Crisis, Trauma, Acculturation*

## **I. Introduction**

From the beginning of the human race, there had been journeys. Early human beings were nomads, who kept on travelling from one place to another, for farming, grazing cattle etc. They did that for their sustenance. But there might also have been the pleasure of travelling, being in different lands, enjoying new sights, savoring diverse experiences, facing new challenges and so on. But as time progressed, more and more people began to prefer living in permanent settlements, fencing their territories, forming their personal as well as communal spaces. All these developments further expanded and lead to clear territorial divisions. The different continents on the landmass were named and each was further divided into unions, nations, states, cities, and so on. However, the ancient nomadic spirit

---

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor on contract, St. Dominic’s College, Kanjirappally, affiliated to Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala, India

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor on contract, St. Dominic’s College, Kanjirappally, affiliated to Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala, India

seemed to have remained somewhere in the human heart, instigating him to make journeys and adventures. The historical details of various trade routes and geographical discoveries are a proof to this. In fact, the very motto of the Victorian period in England was “to strive, to seek, to find and not to yield”, the famous last line of Alfred Lord Tennyson’s “Ulysses”. Thus journeys continued from adventure and pleasure to colonisation and migration.

## **II. Migration: The saga of trauma**

Migration became an important phenomenon in the recent centuries, with many people dislocating themselves to economically prosperous countries for better possibilities in education, job etc. These people move from their place of origin to other places far away by tens of thousands of miles. But they do it from their own will in the hope of a better life. They are known collectively as ‘migrants’. Migrants are accepted by the host countries and are recognized for their work. But there is yet another category, which are like migrants in some respect and completely unlike them in certain other ways, living in several places. They are not actually living, but merely existing. These people are called refugees or forced migrants, the large number of people, especially women and children, who were forced to flee their land under the threat of war, terrorism, civil strife etc.

The definition of a “refugee” is contained in the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of the Refugees, which define a refugee as an individual who “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable or unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country” (UNHCR 2016, p.4). The pictures of refugees from Syria, Iran, Palestine, Lebanon, Libya, Myanmar etc. filled the social media and newspapers one time. The situation has not lessened now. Their condition is still the same. Khaled Hosseini tries to point out the helplessness of refugees at the face of several dangers through his work. A refugee faces problems at every stage of his life that is, in his homeland, in his journey and in the host country. Though the work does not go for a detailed narration of the refugee crisis, it adequately informs the readers of the traumatic experience of being a refugee.

*Sea Prayer* is a short letter, wherein a father pours out his worries about the safety of his son on the eve of their sea-crossing to migrate to Europe from Afghanistan. The work runs just to 15 pages, with illustrations covering its most part. Through this technique the author might have intended to convey the ideas and emotions with greater intensity, using words as well as pictures. The letter, in its last part, is more of an invocation made to the sea, requesting her to protect his son on their journey. The refugees often risk their lives on dangerous and overcrowded boats to escape their home nations. This book is dedicated to the thousands of refugees who perished at sea while fleeing from war and persecution.

The book begins with the father reminiscing about his childhood and those good old happy days. He journeys back to those days, with an insatiable craving for those times. Their land was once peaceful and everyone lived in happiness and harmony. They were not afraid to spread their mattress on the roof tops and sleep there. Sleeping outside was as safe as sleeping inside their houses. Nature was also beautiful then. The “stirring of olive leaves, bleating of grandmother’s goat and the cool air” (Hosseini, p.4) woke them up in the mornings. The father remembers

taking Marwan, his son to that place while he was a toddler along with his wife. But the boy was then too young to remember them now. The father is sad that his son couldn't see and remember his land as he, the father remembered it now. He further writes about how in those days the people, Muslims and Christians lived in fraternity. There were mosques for Muslims and churches for Christians in the same neighborhood. That time is like a dream now, and to go to that place one needs to take a journey on the wings of imagination. Everything changed so fast. The air which was calm suddenly became tumultuous.

The problems in their land began in the form of protests, which was followed by the siege. The skies started spitting bombs and the land was filled with remnants of destruction. Many people lost their lives, others their homes and everything they had. Starvation and death began to consume them like an epidemic. The children like his son Marwan played with bomb craters. Dark blood and limbs blown apart became familiar sights for them. Death was but a common occurrence, and it never was unexpected. The readers realize that Marwan has lost his mother in the war. On the eve of their sea crossing, the father stood on the beach engrossed in anticipation as well as in the hope that the spirit of his dead wife will calm the sea and protect their son through the journey. They need to cross the large ocean to finally reach to safety. But their journey through sea will be even more dangerous than the voyages made to deport criminals from their nations to far off islands such as Australia a hundred or more years before. Also, how they were going to be received by the host country was yet another matter of concern. Even though globalization opened wide vistas and radically reduced obstacles for the movement of people, capital and information, there are many who are under great struggle and peril. Refugees from different parts of the world are among those sections in the society who are unable to enjoy freedom and are always under various restrictions and chains. Therefore, any writings on them would definitely reflect themes of exile, memory and hurt.

Refugees are unwelcomed anywhere they go. Nations fear them. Refugees do not offer anything to the host countries, they only demand. They demand for safety, shelter, food, water and medicine. Their demand is out of helplessness and necessity. A Refugee is like a fish out of the pond. They are an unfortunate group of people, who were stricken by misfortune triggered by someone else. When they migrate from their country they only think about the safety of them and their dear ones. But they face dangers and risks everywhere. Some of the border dangers are well known. In Syria alone, millions of people were killed in the war and several others were forced to leave their houses. Most of the houses, schools and hospitals were damaged or destroyed. In government-controlled areas, there is compulsory conscription into battle for men and fear of arrest and torture. Even if they overcome all these problems and have managed to escape, they face trials and tribulations in their journey.

According to the statistical sources, there were 22.5 million refugees worldwide in 2017, over half of them under 18 years of age. More than half of refugees are from three countries: Syria (5.5 million), Afghanistan (2.5 million) and South Sudan (1.4 million), and the major host countries for refugees are: Turkey (2.9 million), Pakistan (1.4 million), Lebanon (1 million), Iran (979,400 people) (UNHCR 2018, p.8).

With more and more refugee inflow now happening every year, many countries have started building walls against the refugees. Some European countries like Germany still maintains an open attitude towards refugees and many tend to migrate to those countries. However, a major hurdle that awaits people especially from Middle East and

other parts of Asia before reaching the safety of Europe is the crossing of the sea, the major one being the Mediterranean.

The Mediterranean has acquired ill-repute as the world's deadliest sea route, with more and more refugees crossing it in unsafe and overcrowded boats, leading to casualties. "In the first three quarters of 2017, at least 2600 refugees and migrants died or went missing in the Mediterranean, 94% of whom were trying to cross from Libya to Italy" (UNHCR 2018,p.62). Men, women and children attempting these perilous journeys in unseaworthy boats hold their lives in their hands while making these journeys, because reaching the destination is doubtful.

The father in *Sea Prayer* assures his son that nothing bad will happen in their journey. But he is aware about the folly of such words. He writes, "These are only words. A father's tricks"(Hosseini,p.9). Man is very often helpless in the face of natural as well as man-made disasters. Only under those circumstances will he realise his vulnerability. In his work, *A Chronicle of the Peacocks*, the famous Urdu writer from Pakistan, Intizar Hussain compares a refugee to a peacock who used to sit on the wall of paradise. But he unintentionally helped the Satan to enter the Garden of Eden and was therefore thrown out of the paradise by God. Hussain further explains, "that is what happens when we are exiled from our own courtyards. Now, all he (the peacock) can do is find something to sit on – any wall around any courtyard- or any tree or hill where he can find a foothold." (Hussain, p.108)

### **III. Acculturation and Adaptation**

The saga of refugees began from the dawn of human history. The biblical story of the mass exodus of Israelites in search of the Promised Land is well known. But in recent years refugee flow has increased at a tremendous rate, demanding an immediate attention from the world. Providing accommodation to the refugees in host countries is not a solution in itself. It is also necessary to ensure the proper settlement of these refugees in their host countries.

A definition of acculturation is provided by Redfield, Linton and Herskovits: "acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups."(p.145). Compared to the original inhabitants, refugees are a minority who arrive at a different land with different customs and practices. So there is a greater possibility of their culture getting submerged under the host culture. Therefore, acculturation is not an easy process. It can challenge the refugees to reconstruct their selves and identities. When societies become plural, it need not always give way to integration and assimilation. There is also probability for separation and marginalisation.

Different host countries have different attitudes towards immigration and pluralism. Some countries have been built by immigration and this process may be a continuing one. "They may seek to eliminate diversity through integration strategies and programmes of assimilation, while others attempt to segregate or marginalize diverse populations in their societies" (Berry,p.17). The general finding is that, the greater the cultural differences, the less positive is the adaptation. Therefore, it is necessary to ensure cultural and legal protection for the refugees in host countries. Chances for interaction between various cultural groups in a positive manner should be made possible, so that each group comes to realise and respect the distinctive features of the others. It is a relief that the refugee

integration is an important topic on the current global agenda. The United Nations recently adopted the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (2016), in order to reaffirm the importance of refugee population all across the world and to ensure mechanisms to protect these people. It is the responsibility of the present leadership to not repeat the mistakes of colonisation when it comes to dealing with the refugees. Instead of an 'othering', there must be the feeling of oneness among the host and the guest- the native and the refugee.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

A single word might denote different things according to the context. Its nature and meaning can change in line with people and their living conditions. The same is true about the word 'journey'. In every journey there is anticipation, nervousness and excitement, but some of these emotions predominate over others according to the kind of journeys. For a tourist, visiting new land brings excitement. For a migrant, there are mixed feelings- nervousness, anticipation and excitement. But the tourists and migrants still feel safe, at least legally. But this is not so for the refugee. He is in the host country against his will and he need not be accepted by the government and people there. Such refugees have to live amidst several uncertainties regarding to, the duration of their stay in the host country, chances of return to the original nation, possibilities of assimilation, and scopes of rebuilding life in a new land and so on. For them journey is not visiting another land, but the experience of being wrenched of their roots. They keep craving for those roots. Even when they reach a safer place, they continue their journey, now no longer physical but mental. They journey back to their home land in their memories and dreams. Therefore, the life of a refugee can be looked on as an unending journey, a constant exodus.

#### **References**

1. Hosseini, K. (2018). *Sea Prayer*. Riverhead Books.
2. Berry, J. W. (1997). Lead Article - Immigration, Acculturation and Adaptation. *Applied Psychology*, 46(1), 5-34.
3. Husain, I., Bhalla, A., & Adil, V. (2015). A Chronicle of Peacocks. *Manoa*, 27(1), 105-112.
4. Redfield, R., Linton, R., & Herskovits, M. J. (1935). 162. A Memorandum for the Study of Acculturation. *Man*, 35, 145. <http://doi.org/10.2307/2791001>
5. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2019, June 20). *UNHCR Global Trends 2018*. UNHCR. <https://www.unhcr.org/statistics/unhcrstats/5d08d7ee7/unhcr-global-trends-2018.html>
6. *UNHCR Global Trends - Forced displacement in 2016*. (2017, September 14). UNHCR Global Trends - Forced Displacement in 2016. <https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2016/>