

## ***Sea Prayer: A Tribute to Alan Kurdi***

**Prachi Sinha,**  
Research Scholar,  
Department of English,  
B. R. A. Bihar University,  
Muzaffarpur-842001.

Alan Kurdi, a three old boy from Syria, was seen lying dead on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea - on a beach in Turkey, in September 2015. It made the greatest news of the time; whole world became aware and sensitized; a fire caught all over the world regarding the fate of humanity on the earth. The dead boy was photographed by a Turkish photo-journalist Nilufer Demir. The fully dressed boy was lying on the beach with his face down to the ground meeting the edge of the sea water; it appeared as if the boy fell asleep after getting extremely exhausted, and he was uncared, abandoned; the photograph was able to awaken the conscience of humans worldwide. The dead Alan Kurdi through his photograph symbolized the plight of the people in Syria; he became a symbol of the refugees in the hands of the torrents like ISIS.

*Sea Prayer* is the latest literary work by the noted author Khaled Hosseini. It differs from his previous novels for one reason - that the plot and background of this poetic story is Syria where as previous all three novels contained the themes from Afghanistan. Though the theme of terror, torture, suffering, subjugation and ultimately the displacement or migration has been the theme in previous works, this poetic novel also deals in the same anti-humanistic conduct and behaviour of the humans. *Sea Prayer* moves forward to the land of Syria which has become the target of the recent terror attacks. Still it represents the emotions of all the suffering people. He writes not just of Syrians but of

Afghans and Somalis and Iraqis and

Entrepreneurs and Syrians.

All of us impatient for sunrise,

all of us in dread of it.

All of us in search of a safe home. (*Sea Prayer*. New York: Riverhead Books. 2018).

Russian invasion in Afghanistan, the Taliban regime, the Mujahidin in Afghanistan, invasion by the United States, invasion by the Arabs, the Afghan War and many such incidents taking place on the land of various part of Afghanistan had made human life miserable, pitiable and treacherous; they were subjected to innumerable degree of torture and different kinds of subjugation; genocide and military coup were common to kill thousands of citizens in a single stretch. People were either to be killed or to leave the country, if they could be able to do so; it was not an easy task to escape from the surveillance of the people in power. Amir, in *The Kite Runner*, is compelled to leave his native land - Afghanistan; he moves to America;

many other people tried to go out in company of Amir's mighty father, but most of them lastly fail to escape from their saddening journey in life.

Like Afghanistan, Syria too witnessed the wrath of terrorism; The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) emerged as a militant Islamic organization with its Jihad principles. ISIS rule got established in Iraq and Syria with a plan to create an Islamic state with strict adherence to the practices of the Muslim Sharia law. It was initially established as an allied group of Osama-bin-laden's Al-Qaeda in 2004; later in 2013 it went to the extremities of cruelty and mass-killing leading to genocide. Syria during the years 2013 -14 -15 was the worst affected of terrorism and a cursed place as it had become the war zone of the ISIS players. ISIS had become the synonym for violence, public executions and crucifixions, rapes etc.. Moreover the heinous part of their crime was that they used to prepare videos of their barbaric brutal acts and telecast on air or channels. In 2014, public execution of noted journalists like James Foley, Steven Sotloff and other people like medics and aid-workers was posted on the YouTube. Video tapes of killing of twenty one Egyptians in Libya, or a man being thrown off the roof of a high tower building and alike were the common scenes; it not only intimidated the people in general; it compelled to leave the land under compulsion; though no destined place was known anywhere. Most of them were drowned into the Mediterranean sea. Dead bodies sometimes floated on water or were thrown out on the sea-shores. Men were either to perish or to be a refugee if survived while crossing the Mediterranean.

This was the period when people in largest number were compelled to leave the Syrian land and its peripheries; They became refugees in order to search for shelters; their own land did not remain theirs; they had either to die or leave, if survived. Death had become an inevitable reality- one had to die - either by the killers or by the rough weather in or outside the country, or in course of moving to other island - submerge into the sea.

Khaled Hosseini, a writer of emotions and realities, was moved by the haunting image of the three-year Syrian boy, young Alan Kurdi. To commemorate the third anniversary of the death of Alan Kurdi, Hosseini composed his fourth literary creation, *Sea Prayer*. It was published by Riverhead Books in September of 2018. This is a poetic novel, written in only forty eight pages with illustrations and sketches. It is marvellously capable to move the mind and feelings of the readers; it vividly portrays the agony of a father, uncertainty of situations, senses of danger and contradiction of emotions. Through the novel, Hosseini wishes to pay his tribute also to the suffering people of Syria - millions of the families - who were compelled to migrate in search of life and land for their survival - as refugees - without any hope of finding it; who became victims of war and persecution in the hands of terrorists and militants. And most of them were drowned into the sea - sailing into the boats, devoured by the high waves. As a human face, Hosseini announced to donate the income earned from the book to the UNHCR and the Khaled Hosseini Foundation for the charitable works to help the war-sufferers and refugees all over the world.

The novel is written in the form of a letter - a father writing to his son - while ready to start a voyage. People from various parts of the war-ravaged land of Syria and adjacent areas have

gathered on the sea-shore waiting for the arrival of a ship; prepared for sailing to some unknown destination, in order to find refuge or a shelter. They are compelled to leave their homeland; they are feeling detached, dismissed. On the other hand their future is dark, uncertain; destination and fate undecided. More certain they are about their tragic death.

The novel, in a narrative style deals with the experiences of the narrator. The narrator tells about his childhood days spent on his native land in Homs, near Syria. He had a happy life there with his parents and brothers; he enjoyed playing in the fields, with friends in joy and happiness in his farmhouse. As on today, he is a married man and lives with his life and the only son. But the Civil War in Syria has badly affected his family life and he has lost his peace because of this war.. Moreover his son Marwan will never be able to experience the peace and beauties of native life, as he is compelled to leave the place.

Civil War in Syria during 2012 started due to protest made by the civilians against imposition of the extremely strict Sharia Laws by the ISIS forces in Syria. The ruling ISIS eventually began killing the protesters; thus its own civilians. Thousands of people were assassinated; rest were forced to leave the country; they moved to unknown places for shelters. There was a Civil War and deaths, damage to cities and devastations. There were destitute and migration.

The narrator also plans to leave with his wife and son. They arrive at the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, where many other refugees are staying and waiting for a rescue-boat. There is a long line of refugees coming towards the sea with a hope for a boat in order to escape. Narrator with his family also joins them. They have to wait for arrival of the morning and of a relief-boat. Expression made by the narrator's wife clearly indicates their plight and concern. She speaks that only those people will be kinder to the refugees, who have fallen victim and suffered the mass destruction. In the morning, a power boat arrives for their help. They will be carried somewhere where they will take shelter; they are now the refugees. The crowd of the refugees move into the boat, which has become over-loaded. Hosseini is at the best of his artistic perfection while describing the narrator's mind. Narrator knows well that this journey is risky, the boat may get drowned into the sea, because of the long journey and also because of the crowd in the boat. The father - disgusted, disappointed and depressed - knowing well of the uncertainty about the future - attempts to pacify, console and assure his minor son lying asleep, saying: 'All will be well.' 'Hold my hand. Nothing bad will happen,' speaks the father, knowing it fully well that anything wrong can happen at any moment - is the depiction of tragic trauma of the father that he is undergoing through.

This false assurance is the assurance to oneself that gives courage for onward journey even in adversities. It arises a hope - hope of the present, hope in the mind, hope for assurance to others, and above all - hope of falsehood - falsehood to oneself, and to others too; hope amidst and against hopelessness. It is an example of psychological trauma and inner conflict.

This is the contradiction of the situations. Father recalls his childhood which were pleasant, he used to roam in the orchards at his native place - Homs, a city in Syria; now he will never get these; those days were bright, breezy, shiny, and full of life!.

My dear Marwan,  
In the long summers of childhood,  
When I was a boy the age you are now,  
Your uncles and I  
Spread our mattress on the roof  
Of your grandfather's farmhouse  
Outside of Homs. (*Sea Prayer*)

However, his son's immature memory was unable to recall those happy memories. The son can only imagine of those sceneries because he cannot remember them. It presents a picture of the beautiful dwelling city converting into a war zone. In contrast to the father's peaceful childhood in Homs, his son has the following experiences:

You know a bomb crater  
Can be made into a swimming hole.  
You have leamed  
Dark blood is better news  
Than bright. (*Sea Prayer*)

The novel starts with these lines expressing the brutal outcome of war - bombs; the swimmingholes; the dark blood; the bright blood; the dark being better than the bright ones. The description is deeply effective and moving; it is picturesque; it is powerful. The disappointment of the narrator father is expressed, by Den Williams through the palette of blues with painting of the dark night and the vast expanding surface of sea.

For the present, the dangerous sea is before them to be crossed, and it is dreadful.

We find this portrayal of life as amalgamation of contradictions - leaving one's own native land is not an easy task; on the other hand staying in a place which has converted into a war zone and has become war raged is not possible. On one hand, the narrator father reassures his scared family, on the other hand in the next page of the book, he admits that what he says are only words—"a father's tricks". All he—all anyone—can do is pray.

The only thing that the father could do was that he could falsely console his son and pray the sea in order to reach a safer place when he got it crossed over - to a safer place; transforming his prayer into a 'sea prayer'.

Once Agatha Christie said, "*One of the luckiest things that can happen to you in life is, I think, to have a happy childhood.*" Those who don't have a happy childhood or even worse, those who have a terrible childhood with the memories of the skies spitting bombs, starvation, burials are the wretched creatures on earth. This statement appears to be very correct and the most relevant in case of a children like Marwah, or Alan Kurdi the child lying on the sea-shore, or the innumerable victims of war who went unnoticed and got never in their mention in the book of records or in the pages of history.

The Indian Prime Minister Sri Narendra Modi has times and often mentioned that terrorism knows no caste, creed, religion or gender; it does not discriminate among young or old, male or female, rich or poor, known or unknown; it kills all - irrespective of any considerations. It knows no boundaries of nations or land; terrorism is and has always been anti-humanistic; it always brings damages, devastations and deaths. The following lines are supportive of the idea that no land is aloof and unaffected from this anti-humanistic act. Be it the Afghans, or the Somalis, or the Iraqis, or the Eritreans or the Syrians - all are facing the same eventualities - all waiting for a boat to sail in - in search of a safe place of shelter - all refugees, more assured of their death rather of reaching a safe place - passing through the tidy waves of the sea under the dark, wide, infinite sky.

All of us impatient for sunrise,  
all of us in dread of it.  
All of us in search of a safe home.

The book is a joint venture of Hosseini and the painter Dan Williams; Dan Williams being the illustrator, has beautifully created images for the imagination in the mind of the novelist; he successfully painted these on the canvas and then presented in the pages of the book; the paintings contain the most elaborating meanings and effects.

The book is equally good for the adults and the children as well, especially because of its lyrical prose or being a poetic novel; because of being composed with the photographs and watercolour illustrations, the book is being suggested for reading in children's schools. Though it has terrorism or war as its content and theme, its beautiful picturization and description with help of words as well as snaps of pictures - it bears more the positive effects than the negative ones. There are lush greens, warm reds and yellows - denoting the sweetness of humanity; on the contrast there are deep grey and brown and black - symbolizing the bitterness of human lives. The words compel to think and ponder over; the illustrations lead the reader to the deeper layer of meaning.

*Sea Prayer*, a short poetic novel consisting of only 48 pages, is composed with the illustrations of beautiful watercolour; these watercolour illustrations create a wonderful and strong impact on the mind of readers. One gets lost in the beatitudes of the images. The story, because of its theme, presentation and contents, is more like a message; written with a poem flavour but it is worthy and interesting for both - adult and the young.

It contains the theme of the war affected refugees prepare to leave their land. They arrive on the sea beach and wait for a boat which will carry them to a safer place. In the morning a small motor-boat arrives and the crowd enter into the boat. The narrator is aware of the risk involved into the journey undertaken. Still, he consoles his son that everything will be fine. The narrator can foresee that the boat may even be drowned, as such he prays for the safety of his son. Also for all present on the boat.

Hosseini ends the story with an epitaph. The epitaph states that the story is inspired by the death of the three year old refugee boy, Alan Kurdi. Alan Kurdi, along with his family and

many others was drowned into the sea, while making a journey to a safe place. The dead body of the little boy was seen lying on the sand of the beach. The photograph, captured by a Turkish photo-journalist Nilufer Demir. The helplessness of the boy's innocent face was heart-touching. It was so innocent a face with lovely grace, that could automatically and naturally win favour and attention of the whole world. In the epitaph it is also mentioned that the following year of the death of Alan Kurdi, about 4000 refugees were drowned or got missing while crossing the Mediterranean Sea.

The book is a tribute to the memory of Alan Kurdi; it and commemorates the third anniversary of his unnatural, premature, sad demise.

## **Citations:**

Hosseini, Khaled. *Sea Prayer*. New York: Riverhead Books.

Hosseini, Khaled. *The Kite Runner*. New York: Riverhead Books. 2003.