

**A Critical Reflection on the Picture Book *Sea Prayer* by Khaled Hosseini**

<sup>1</sup>U Maria Liny Jenifer

Full Time PhD Research Scholar

Department of English

Periyar University, Salem

Tamil Nadu, India

[linyjeni@gmail.com](mailto:linyjeni@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>Dr. B. J. Geetha

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Periyar University, Salem

Tamil Nadu, India

[geetprem05@gmail.com](mailto:geetprem05@gmail.com)

**Abstract**

This paper attempts to analyze the theme of migration and the refugee crisis in *Sea Prayer*. In addition, this paper attempts to facilitate the undergraduate students/ learner/ readers to understand the literary theory and concepts especially migration, and refugee crisis through the picture book. *Sea Prayer* by Khaled Hosseini is a picture book based on the tragic incident that emphasizes the struggles in migration and the plight of the Syrian refugees. In the literary theory classes, terms like diaspora, migration and refugee are repetitive, but the level of understanding of these terms are difficult to the learners. As picture book contains images, colors, and short paragraphs, it is an easy way to understand the issues in migration, and trauma in refugees. Picture books help the students especially the beginners to interpret and critically interrogate the text. The color variations in the book evoke a sensation of happiness and sadness which is embedded in the text. Picture book provides critical reflection on the relevant issues because it creates self-interest and involvement towards the text. Critical reflection on *Sea Prayer* makes the reader realize and understand the issues in migration. The reading process of the picture book for undergraduate students results in reflexive thinking regarding the themes in the text. *Sea Prayer* as picture book evokes the sense of liveliness and makes the reader to realise the plight of refugees and struggles during migration. Critically, the picture book *Sea Prayer* makes the reader focus on the social and migration issues and it leads to a different learning experience to the readers.

**Keywords:** Picture book, Diaspora, Migration, Refugee, Trauma, Khaled Hosseini

**INTRODUCTION**

Literature reflects the society and it records the historical events that pave the way for textual history. Literature is the major discipline which articulates moral and social issues in the world. It becomes a major source to record, discuss, and interpret social issues. The inspiration to write a piece of art starts with an idea of interest and concern towards the issue. The literary works especially prosaic works are considered as the difficult genre to understand and to listen because prose texts are mostly taught through lecture mode of instruction and dictation of notes. These ways of approach lack in a proper understanding of the text and it hinders the critical reflection of the text. The increase in the number of researches on the diaspora of different countries and quest for identity of diasporic individuals or communities paved the way to analyze the text within the context of migration and refugee crisis.

The diaspora of South Asian countries and Middle East countries are due to the war, conflicts, and instability in political governance. The diasporic themes which are largely focussed by the writers of these countries have a different point of view on migration. Migration due to war results in the uprooting of the families from their native country to the migrating countries. The displacement of the home is not for seeking jobs or in search of happy luxurious life but to exist in the world. The connectivity to the native land is known only in the form of memories and flashbacks. The nostalgic feeling towards the native country and the struggle of being refugee are abstract, and the dictated notes and series of lectures are at some point fail to convey the emotions of the refugees to the learners.

The prosaic text is the medium for multiple interpretations and critical reflections. As the deconstructionists point of view, the meaning of the text lies within the text. The level of understanding the text is determined through the in-depth reading because it opens the gateway for various interpretations and perspectives. The involvement between the text and the learners lead to the multiple interpretation and improves the critical reflection of the text. Reading the prose works might end up in boredom and so reading the prose work as novels, short stories, essays with illustrations help the learners to involve and interconnect with the text. The Picture books or illustrated books are an interesting means to read the text with involvement and it helps to analyze the themes of the particular text. [1] Wolfenbarger and Sipe define a picture book as a book in which the picture is as important as the text. The texts and illustrations are fused together to provide a proper understanding of the text.

The picture books based on the migration and refugee assists the learners for a better understanding of the text and helps to critically analyze the aspects of migration and life of

refugees. The lecturing classes on the text becomes more interesting with the picture book. [2] Chia-Ho Sun discusses the effects of instructional modes based on picture book in three ways as “picture-book reading-only (PRO), picture-book reading plus vocabulary instruction (PRVI), and picture-book reading plus reading-based collaborative output activity (PRCOA) on young adult EFL (English as a foreign language) learners’ vocabulary acquisition and retention. These type of reading strategies increases the involvement with the text”. [3] Gail Cochrane suggests new ideas to interpret the picture book with literary concepts that picture books are also great resources for exploring visual and written language, imagination, values, and deeper cross-curricular themes.

*Sea Prayer* is a picture book written by Khaled Hosseini and illustrated by Dan Williams. Khaled Hosseini is an Afghan American writer, he is born in 1965 at Kabul, Afghanistan and now resides in the United States. He is the Goodwill envoy for United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), also known as The UN Refugee Agency. Khaled Hosseini has written three bestselling novels, *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, and *And the Mountains Echoed*. The works of Khaled Hosseini focuses on the glory and fortunate days, and its transgressed days of violence and war of the countries like Afghanistan and Syria. The primary reference to the works of Khaled Hosseini deals with reality and focuses on familial and universal themes. It includes the struggles in the course of migration and traumatic experiences of refugees. Dan Williams is a London based professional illustrator, his illustrations transform the magic of words into painting and the book, *Sea Prayer* has its molded form in conveying the intrinsic feelings of migration and refugee. This paper attempts to analyze the theme of migration and the refugee crisis in *Sea Prayer*. In addition, this paper attempts to facilitate the undergraduate students to understand the literary theory and concepts especially migration and refugee crisis through the picture book.

## **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

The background of the study provides information on the definitions of migration, refugee, and picture book. Etymologically the word “diaspora” originated from the Greek word *speiro* (to scatter or to sow) and *dia* (over, through or around). The Biblical reference to the Diaspora is that Jews exiled from Israel by the Babylonians. Diaspora defined as the scattering or migration of a population to the place of a destination. Migration is the process that makes an individual rely on others because of the detachment from the native country. However, in recent times, Diaspora is the general term to describe the migration of refugees.

Migration of people not only specifies the geographical location but also their psyche. The diasporic elements of nostalgia, displacement, identity crisis, alienation, loneliness, and belonging to the native land are more attached to the emotions of the migrant. Forced migration is one of the types of migration that makes an individual migrate due to war and violence. The displacement

from native land is like an escape from the intolerable chaotic situations to survive in this world. The field of Refugee Studies has grown dramatically over the latter part of the twentieth-century. [4] The research article entitled, *Fifty Years of Refugee Studies: From Theory to Policy* by Richard Black provides information on the theoretical approach and the political influence on refugees. The first International Organization for the Study of the World Refugee Problem established as an association in Liechtenstein in 1950. The definition of a refugee according to Geneva Convention as amended by the New York Protocol of 1969 is someone who is outside their own country due to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion. According to Simpson, the definition of refugees in terms of government policy as follows:

the essential quality of a refugee ... [is]... that he has left his country of regular residence... as a result of political events in that country which render his continued residence impossible or intolerable, and has taken refuge in another country, or if already absent from his home, is unwilling or unable to return, without danger to life or liberty, or as a direct consequence of the political conditions existing there. [4]

The settlement in the host country of any refugee always makes them to rethink their existing life with their past life. The happy and treasurable life becomes unrepresentable memories by the refugees. They re-experience happy and sad moments, it leads to disassociate the mind of the refugee. The unsaid sad memories inflict the mind as a trauma. The books which contain the painful and emotional words convey the struggles of a refugee, but there is a gap in between the text and its meaning especially to understand the plight of refugees.

*Sea Prayer* is an illustrated book or a picture book by Khaled Hosseini which commemorates the second death anniversary of the three-year-old Syrian refugee, Alan Kurdi. The inspiration behind *Sea Prayer* is the dead corpse of Alan Kurdi on the Mediterranean Sea shore on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2015. This picture evokes pangs of pain and plight of the refugee and ironically questions humanity and interrogates the claims of the country's border. The story focusses on the night before a fatal journey, a father reflects with his son on their life in Syria before the war and their unknown future. The illustrations of bazaars, natural environment, migration of people, and fear of death are the core elements in *Sea Prayer*.

The picture books bridge the gap between the text and the thinking process. Carol Driggs Wolfenbarger and Lawrence R. Sipe's research article entitled *A Unique Visual and Literary Art Form: Recent Research on Picture Books* defines picture book as it represents "a unique visual and literary art form that engages young readers and older readers in many levels of learning and pleasure" [5]. Picture books about refugees address a range of universal emotions, including fear,

grief, and confusion. The picture books or illustrated books contain colors, images, and short paragraphs. It helps the learners to understand the emotions and feelings of the character in the text and to interpret the text with multiple layers of meaning.

Picture book develops the interest in reading the text, provides a new learning experience to the readers. The Picture book is an inter-animation, a process by which the verbal text draws the reader's attention to the illustration and the words with a specificity of color, shape, and form provide proper information of the text. *Sea Prayer* provokes a multi-layered understanding of Syrian refugees, civil war and power. The effectiveness of the use of picture books is that increases creative thinking.

For undergraduate students, *Sea Prayer* as a picture book advocates the thoughtfulness on multicultural children's literature because it provides opportunities for the students to develop critical thinking and enhances their reading skills by way of their knowledge on the differences in cultural models through multiple points of view.

### **FOCUS OF THE PAPER**

The main focus of this paper is to analyze the picture book, *Sea Prayer* within the context of migration and refugee crisis. Every classroom is the source of producing knowledge and it provides a space for creative and critical thinking. In the classroom, the prosaic text is taught to undergraduates with anecdotes or examples are given by the teacher for a better understanding of the text. The picture book is one of the means to create a curiosity in learning as well as it provides an opportunity to develop their imagination and narrative skills. The beginners of reading literary concepts and theories gather the information on particular concepts and theories only as the words but picture book makes the learners to understand the pain and grief of the words through pictures. As the painter paints the picture, the writer writes the story and these two arts are interwoven and leads to the search for the in-depth meaning of the text. Critical reflection on the text is the intellectual quest that leads to intertextuality and multi-layered meanings of the text. The mood and tone of the words and the text connect the reader's experiences with the text based on the theme of the text.

The illustrations of *Sea Prayer* affect the psyche of the readers and it makes the readers to think and critically interrogate on the themes of the text. Diasporic elements, migrants' psyche and crisis in the journey of refugees are read through the words and paintings. The silent grief of the father is said aloud through the paintings and his memories. The happy and sad part of life is picturized effectively that emphasizes the reader's involvement in the text. The article by Christina Vercelletto quotes the significance of pictures as "Pictures are an immediate conduit to emotional connection... if you want people to really engage with a topic, whether you are publishing a

newspaper, writing a blog, or teaching a class, show a picture from which a narrative can be inferred or imagined” [6]. The sympathy on the characters in the story makes an intrinsic change in readers. It makes the readers to feel the empathy of the pathetic situation of the refugees and there is a personal connection with the text.

*Sea Prayer* is a story that revolves around Marvan and Marvan’s father. *Sea Prayer* contains illustrations of Syrian bazaars and buildings that picturizes the happy days of the country, Syria. The happy and precious memories of the olden days are illustrated with green shades that symbolize prosperity, harmony, and strong emotional attachment with safety. As the colors suggest Marvan’s father narrates the happy days in Syria and cherishes the moments of peace and harmony. The memory of his past life conveys his belongingness towards the native land. Through his narration, he lives in the past because the present life is insecure and very difficult to live in the native land. The diasporic aspects of nostalgia and belongingness are revealed through the words of Marvan’s father.

Syria becomes an insecure place to live due to power conflicts, political, and social issues. These confusions and the dominance of power in terms of authority affected the lives of the Syrian. War is the species of violence between powerful countries starts with protest. To control the chaotic situation, the government takes steps against the commotion in society. Human values of being tolerant towards unwanted issues are replaced by instant decisions that lead to destruction. The line in *Sea Prayer* as, “First come the protests. Then the siege” [7] conveys the inhuman activities in the emergence of war. The destruction in Syria is only in terms of the commodity. The illustration of the protest is similar to the illustration of the migration. Both illustrations have the journey of a group of people. First, the journey with banners intends to get the justice from the ruling government. Second, the journey with possessions that is migration represents and questions justice to humanity. The journey to the unwelcoming country as a refugee carries numerous questions regarding survival and identity.

The illustrations of the two journeys depict the refugee’s geographical and psychological landscape. As the story continues there are illustrations with dark grey and black color along with the words of the father as “The skies spitting bombs. Starvation. Burials. These are the things you know” [7]. The agony of migration from native land to the host land and the being refugee in an unknown country are illustrated in an effective manner with the words of Marvan’s father saying that “we are the uninvited. We are the unwelcome.” [7]. The refugees become the witness of war and the color black symbolizes the negative atmosphere and authority in *Sea Prayer*. This reflects the life of Syrian refugees as they are surrounded by the fear of death that ends up in the quest for

identity and home. Their lives are put into test amidst pain, struggle, and their hope to live with peace especially with their basic needs.

“All of us in search of home” [7], these words by Marvan’s father reflect the psyche of refugees that they are restless and in search of peace and safety. Marvan’s father thoughts reflect the insecure life of refugees, “Because all I can think tonight is how deep the sea, and how vast, how different. How powerless I am to protect you from it” [7]. The pain and responsibility of the father are addressed through the words of Marvan’s father. These lines bring out the personal reflection with the text that at any cost father especially the parents take the responsibilities to safeguard their children. The deepness and darkness of the sea and the waves reflects the minds of the refugees, especially Marvan’s father. It reflects the fear and anxiety to cross the native country’s border and dreadful future.

The psyche of an individual is affected by witnessing horrific events and becomes a traumatized memory. Trauma in literature is the scar in the mind which makes the victim to live with muted voices. The mind has numerous versions of voices like sorrowful, haunted, and unrepresentable memories. Once an individual is severely affected by trauma, their mind lacks trust in the material things and human beings, and they totally rely on God. This desperate situation is seen in *Sea Prayer*, Marvan’s father says, “All I can do is pray” [7]. The prayer on the seashore for his son, Marvan, is an intense prayer for safety and he hears the whispering voices of Marvan’s mother which increases hope in a desperate situation. The compassionate words of a father to his son as, “Hold my hand. Nothing bad will happen” [7] with the illustration of blue color symbolizes trust, confidence, faith, positive, and beneficial psychological relief to the mind and body. Marvan’s father exposes his intense feeling memory as a migrant as, “But that life, that time, seems like a dream now” [7]. Being a migrant and refugee, memories of the past make him to mourn for the loss and to witness the changes in the society.

The illustrations of a boat with the group of people, and people who are waiting for the boat to escape from the dangerous situation, and sky with full of smoke evokes a sensation to the learners about the struggles of a refugee and their helpless condition during migration. In classrooms, the colors and shapes in the text, *Sea Prayer* helps the learner to concentrate more on the issues in Syria.

## **CONCLUSION**

The critical reflection on *Sea Prayer* made the reader to think on the personal needs of refugees and the vehemently emphasize peace in life. The crisis in the lives of refugees are not only physical or emotional damage but it includes the attitude of political and refugee policy members. However, the personal loss and suffering of refugees are not fulfilled by the economical well-being

by reconstructing society. The process of reading literary concepts through picture book resulted in witnessing the imaginary world of the text through illustrations. In addition, promotes self-learning and makes the learner to get more involved with the text. *Sea Prayer* pays the way to understand the migrant's issues. The prayer and advice to Marvan given by his father with the illustrations implicate the learner for a better understanding of the text. The theoretical classes on the concepts and theories can become an interesting and insightful class with the usage of picture books. The world is in need of human values, teaching these values through picture book helps the learners to develop their personality.

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