

# The Prayer of Refugee Children

Naiting He 

Qinghai Normal University, Xining, China

Email: 445870645@qq.com

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## Abstract

As a member of human society, children are the future of the family, country, nation, and mankind indeed. With the development of human civilization, the protection of children's rights attracts more and more attention due to increasing refugee crisis. Especially the group of refugee children caused by armed conflicts has aroused focus and sympathy worldwide. As an Afghan-born American novelist, Khaled Hosseini's literary works are all about the theme of refugees. In particular, his new work *Sea Prayer* which was published in 2018 shows the issue of refugee children in a bald statement. With a strong desire to expect people to look at this issue from a humanitarian perspective, Khaled Hosseini's stresses the importance of mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence, which happens to coincide with the idea of a community with shared future for mankind. This paper puts forward the issue of refugee children from the perspective of the community with a shared future for mankind by analyzing Khaled Hosseini and his new work *Sea Prayer*. In the first place, it makes the introduction to Khaled Hosseini and his work and analyzes his awareness of refugee issue. Then, the paper establishes the causes of refugee children and the current situation and difficulties to protect refugee children. The conclusion discusses that Khaled Hosseini's work reflects the literary orientation of the community with a shared future for mankind, which will provide a certain valuable guidance and practice for effectively solving refugee crisis.

## Keywords

Khaled Hosseini, Refugee Children,  
Community with a Shared Future for Mankind

## 1. Introduction to Khaled Hosseini and His New Work *Sea Prayer*

Khaled Hosseini is the first Afghan-born American novelist writing in English.

He was born in 1965 in Kabul, Afghanistan, and moved to the United States with his family later and graduated from the University of California. His works include *The Kite Runner* (2003), *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), and *The Mountains Echoed* (2013) and *Sea Prayer* (2018). More than 55 million copies have been sold worldwide. With personal and specific expression, he presents Afghanistan, a remote and mysterious country, to the wider world in a delicately literary style.

The new work, entitled *Sea Prayer*, is a short, illustrated book which Hosseini wrote in response to the current refugee crisis and the haunting image of young Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old Syrian boy whose body washed up on the beach in Turkey in September 2015. Khaled Hosseini's new work *Sea Prayer* was published in 2018, which was also his first work writing for children. It is also a deeply moving and gorgeously illustrated short story for people of all ages. The theme, which he is good at, is about emotional ties between family members. Readers from foreign countries once commented that by reading this book, they can find the touching feeling again when reading *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

*Sea Prayer* is exquisitely illustrated by Dan Williams, who is a very famous British illustrator. Dan Williams has been an illustrator for over 25 years, and worked for creating illustrations for dozens of media including *The Guardian*, *National Geographic*, and *Rolling Stone*. The first half of the watercolor illustrations in the book with terrestrial color expresses the warmth of hometown, while the second half conveys the dilemma brought by the war in a gray tone. The steel-blue sea symbolizes the unknown fear. The contrast between the illustrations before and after deepens the tension of the text to a higher degree.

*Sea Prayer*, with its epistolary style, tells the story of a Syrian father who was sailing across the sea to Europe at night. The father watched his son who was sleeping soundly and told him about the beautiful scenery of his Syrian hometown in the past and the dangers of drifting on the sea. He spoke of the long summers during his childhood to his boy by recalling his grandfather's house in Syria, the stirring of olive trees in the breeze, the bleating of his grandmother's goat, the clanking of her cooking pots. *Sea Prayer* is an attempt to pay tribute to the millions of families, like Alan Kurdi's, who have been splintered and forced from home by war and persecution. Hosseini hopes to inspire people to look at the issue of refugee from a perspective of humanitarianism by such work as the *Sea Prayer*.

Currently, there are various comments on the *Sea Prayer* in a number of newspapers and magazines abroad. *The Guardian* comments that "Dan Williams's watercolours are a haunting companion to the contemplative and poetic story of a father fleeing Syria with his son. Though considerably shorter than *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* or *And the Mountains Echoed*, it opens up as many powerful emotions about family, survival and childhood." *The Sunday Times Magazine* comments that "The book may be brief, but it is beau-

tiful, poetic—a distillation of his strengths. It combines Hosseini’s multiple personae, as a wordsmith, as a father and even as a doctor.” *Publishers Weekly, STARRED BOX Review* claims that “Hosseini’s story, aimed at readers of all ages, does not dwell on nightmarish fates; instead, its emotional power flows from the love of a father for his son. In Williams’s loosely stroked ink-and-wash spreads, the corals and greens of the Syrian countryside give way to war’s gray shadows and the sea’s blue hues. Expansive views of sky and water both temper the text’s emotional build and render the figures in them small and fragile. Together, the evocative illustrations and graceful, compelling prose make it clear that Marwan and his parents have no choice but to trust the sea.”<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Khaled Hosseini’s Awareness of Refugee Children Issues

With the development of human civilization, the protection of children’s rights attracts more and more attention. Within the context of an international community in particular, the group of refugee children caused by armed conflicts has aroused focus and sympathy all over the world. Children, who are simply weak and lack of self-protection ability, undoubtedly become the most vulnerable group in these conflicts and riots, and there would be no guarantees about proper rights being realized. Their living conditions are even particularly worrying. The unbearable consequences on children caused by armed conflicts are not only the destruction of their physical health, but also emotional trauma, thus leaving unbearable pain and sadness on the way to their life-long growth.

The issue with the aim of protecting refugee children has received worldwide attention. The scale of refugee children has not been reduced step by step even though human civilization has stepped into a new stage, but has increased to a certain extent. People dream of living in a peaceful world. However, human beings’ scramble for interests act as a trigger for a series of armed conflicts, thereby complicating the problems of refugees, even refugee children. On September 2, 2015, Aylan Kurdi, a Syrian refugee child, was killed on Burton beach in Turkey, which has aroused great concern all over the world. There is an urgent need for the international organizations and EU policy makers to find effective measures to solve the resultant problems.

In addition to being a writer, Hosseini, who has similar experience of refuge, was also alarmed by this unfortunate incident. He has always been concerned about the land where he was born and raised. The chaotic situation in the Middle East has forced a large number of people to stay away from their hometowns, and travel across the sea to start an unknown life in a strange country. In 2006, Hosseini was appointed as the goodwill ambassador of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Hosseini wants to dedicate *Sea Prayer* to all refugees who have died in the sea for escaping war and persecution. He focuses on the fate of this special group with a great belief that everyone is likely to experience a wandering moment, so we should be more tolerant and empathic to

<sup>1</sup><https://detail.youzan.com/show/goods?alias=35zadmbda2bs1> [EB].

those who are in difficult times.

Hosseini said that some countries from European Union (EU) are closing their doors to refugees, and showing a marked disinclination to refugee issue. The refugee issue is not only in connection with European countries, but also one that needs to be shared and faced by the whole world. EU must undertake the responsibility to alleviate conflicts between refugees and receiving countries, and move quickly turns some enlightened policies into reality, thereby subsiding the violent conflicts in some areas.

From the point of being a goodwill ambassador from UNHCR, Hosseini hopes that some decision makers should consider three key points in formulating policies. Firstly, they need to ensure that refugees will have a healthy family. Secondly, people who have been persecuted must have the right to seek refuge. Thirdly, affording enough respect of personality and dignity to refugees is needed. Hosseini states that people should take more empathy and understanding on treating refugees. He is willing to believe in the nature of kindhearted humanity. If people can realize what refugees have gone through, even if they know only a little, they will comprehend the choice of the refugees.

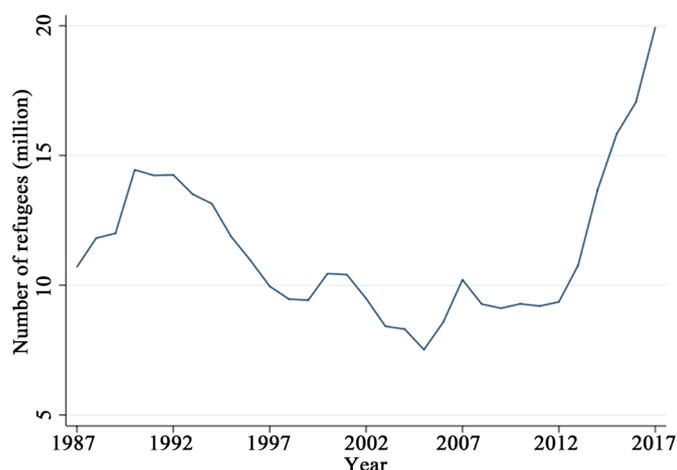
It is very difficult to change the situation of refugees by literary works, but those kinds of stories must be told. Hosseini wrote this work *Sea Prayer* with a strong desire to inspire people to look at the refugee issue on humanitarian grounds. Numbers on the news may not resonate with us emotionally, but they are living people behind the headlines. Empathy for stories is an innate human instinct. If we want to understand something, we must learn how to care about it. If we want to care about something, we must have empathy firstly.

### **3. The Causes for Refugee Children's Happening**

The term "refugee" includes both refugees and asylum seekers. Under the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol, a refugee is defined as "a person who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group" (Xavier et al., 2021). From the UNHCR Population Statistics Reference database which contains data for the period 1951-2017 (released on June 19, 2019), we can see the sharp increase in the number of refugees over the past decade is evident (**Figure 1**).

Since 2015, Europe has faced the largest refugee crisis since World War II. Women and children make up a large majority of the world's refugees. Millions of refugee children are suffering profoundly. They are belonging to risk groups.

As the future of human beings, Children act as the hope of the whole nation. The protection of children is the general consensus of the international community. However, we are living in a world with incomplete peace. Some areas engaged in armed conflicts from time to time. We are witnessing a disturbing increasing in the number of children who are victims of armed conflict. The emergence of refugee children is synchronous with the occurrence of war and



**Figure 1.** Charts the global refugee population over time.

armed conflict. Refugee children are living in an extremely harsh environment. They are not only faced with serious famine, a high proportion of malnutrition, large-scale gender violence and other humanitarian crises, but also are often troubled by various diseases. The rights of children in war are greatly violated.

Although the United Nations Convention on the rights of the child, the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict and other international regulations have made corresponding provisions on the protection of children's rights and interests, it is extremely difficult to achieve the goal of protecting their rights in real war. In the era of globalization, the problem of refugee children is no longer single and regional. It has a comprehensive impact on the world's economy, politics, social security and other aspects.

It is after the Second World War that the issue of refugee children attracted the attention from international community. The international situation of refugee children is still very grim. Basically speaking, the causes of the refugee children are consistent with refugee problems. The most direct causes of refugee problems are climate and environmental factors, which cannot be controlled by external forces. When it comes to human aspects, politics is the most important one.

There are three main political reasons for the emergence of refugee children. The first one is political persecution, which means to deprive children's basic rights through political power, thus forcing them to leave their country through various restrictive measures and become refugees in the end. The second one is war and armed conflict, in which different political forces are fighting for interests, leading to the emergence of refugees (Jin, 2019). For example, in June 2019, the latest annual report released by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees showed that by the end of 2018, refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar and Somalia accounted for 67% of the total number of refugees in the world. There are 6.7 million refugees in Syria, 2.7 million in Afghanistan, 2.3 million in South Sudan, 1.1 million in Myanmar and 900,000 in Somalia (Wei, 2019). In addition, the issue of refugee children concerned by the

international community is the result of conforming to the developing trend of times. International politicians make active response to the demands of human rights. The problem of refugee children has become the focus of the world, which has been an interconnected whole. For example, on September 2, 2015, the body of Aylan Kurdi was floating on a beach in Turkey, which has made the international community pay more attention to the issue of Syrian refugee children. It can be said that it is precisely because of the attention and efforts of the international community that the word “refugee children” is increasingly used in the international media, and the issue of refugee children has become the focus of attention in the field of international politics.

Although the number of refugee children is very small due to economic reasons, the development of globalization and economic situation of refugee families make the problem of refugee children more obvious (Jin, 2019). At present, there is a serious phenomenon of polarization between the rich and the poor in economic globalization. The western developed countries occupy a favorable position in the global competition, while the economic development of some relatively backward countries is too slow. In order to make a better life, some citizens of backward countries illegally immigrate to developed countries, but they are not protected by their destination countries, so they may become refugees. The number of refugees in developing countries accounts for 86% of the total number of refugees, which fully shows the strong desire of refugees to get a better material life (Bai, 2015). For example, on October 23, 2019, the British police found a container which contains 39 bodies in the port of Purfleet, Essex, UK, who were later proved to be illegal immigrants from Vietnam.

Refugee children, due to some cultural reasons, refer to those who are suffered from various conflicts among different groups or nations with different cultural concepts. At the same time, the progress of civilization makes human beings pay more attention to the problem of refugee children. Therefore, the cultural conflict and the progress of civilization are also the causes of the problem of refugee children. The situation of refugee children caused by cultural conflicts is more obvious in the Middle East. For instance, although they both believe in Islam, Shiite Iran and Sunni Arab countries are often in opposition. There are also some writings of struggles between Sunni and Shiite in Hosseini’s works. Children are deeply involved in the armed conflicts. They are deprived of the right to education. They have to find food at the risk of war, bearing the danger to become the targets of snipers and suffer from both physical and mental injuries. They have suffered a total dislocation of their lives. Just as the saying from the father in *Sea Prayer*, “I have heard it said we are uninvited. We are the unwelcome. We should take our misfortune elsewhere” (Khaled, 2018).

At the same time, the progress of civilization has also made people pay more attention to the problem of refugee children. Attaching importance to the protection of refugee children is the result of the progress of human civilization. As members of human beings, refugee children should be protected on the basis of

morality and ethic. Human beings should be responsible for this issue due to their competition for each other's interests. As Montessori said, our mistakes will fall on children and leave them an indelible past. We will die, but our children will bear the consequences caused by our mistakes. Any impact on children will affect the development of human beings (Maria, 2012: P. 23). The United Nations points out that at present, there are about 30 people around the world are forced to be displaced by conflict or persecution in every minute. The huge scale of the refugee problem is a serious challenge in itself. At the moment, the number of people who are forced to be displaced in the world has reached nearly 70 million, which is the highest level ever recorded. The number is doubled in comparison with 20 years ago.

#### 4. Current Situation of Refugee Children

According to the report released from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in *The Guardian* on September 7, 2016, new global disputes have been emerging unceasingly in the past five years. The number of refugee children has rocketed by more than 75% with 8 million in total, which accounts for more than half of all refugees in the world. About 50 million children around the world have moved abroad or are often displaced, and 28 million have been forced to move because of the war. Syria is the country with the largest number of refugees and refugee children, and next one is Afghanistan.

Depending on the *World Migration report 2020*, the number of global refugees has reached 25.9 million in 2018. 52% of the population of global refugees is under the age of 18. Resulting from violence and conflict, the number of displaced persons who have become destitute and homeless within the borders has reached 41.3 million. It is the highest number on record since the Internal Displacement Testing Center began monitoring in 1998 (Center for China & Globalization, 2020).

On July 1, 2019, the UNHCR released a report that more than 1.44 million refugees in more than 60 countries around the world need to be resettled in 2020. The report points out that because of the gap between the number of refugees who need to be resettled and the space provided by governments around the world, only a small number of refugees in the world can be resettled.

António Guterres, the Secretary General of the United Nations, said that we need international cooperation and effective response more than ever. We should spare no efforts to provide better solutions for those who are forced to flee their homes, and give more help to the communities and countries that house them. There is no doubt that when the right to apply for asylum is under attack, many countries refuse to open their gates to refugees. Even refugee children are imprisoned and forced to be separated from their families, hence we must reiterate human rights of refugees again. It can be said that where refugees go, global aid should follow. The support for vulnerable groups is the deepest part of human nature. Today, we must do our best to ensure that the humanitarian spirit is carried forward and defeat those who seem determined to let it be

destroyed.

## **5. The Literary Orientation of the Community with a Shared Future for Mankind and Chinese Practice for Refugee Issue**

Community plays an important role in defining people's social identity, social customs, social roles and so on. The construction of community offers ways for people to connect on cultural, social, political, legal and moral levels. Building a community of Shared future for mankind is the core and theoretical basis of Xi Jinping's diplomatic thought. It is a Chinese proposal solve the problems of peace and development in the world at the height of the progress of mankind and expresses China's aspiration and pursuit of international order. It has drawn a blueprint for the common development and long-term stability of human society.

A community of Shared future for mankind has rich cultural connotation, which contains the common value pursuit of all mankind. It complies the trend of the times, which is adopted for peace, development, cooperation and win-win. On the road to the building of a community of shared future for mankind, literature also should undertake unique responsibilities and make particular contributions (Chen & Zhou, 2019: p.83).

World literature and the construction of a community of shared future for mankind can complement and reinforce each other. The cohesion of literary community is due to the common emotional pursuit of human beings, thereby individuals are connected to form an imaginary community. Although the widespread presence of diversified ideas and values will be lasted in such context of cultural globalization, the construction of literary community helps to eliminate the moral divergence and conflict among countries. World literature is not only used to criticize and oppose the evil imperialist wars, but also to praise the humanitarian ideal of cosmopolitanism. Works from all over the world span the boundaries of country, nation, language and culture, representing conformity trend of multicultural and indicating the possibility and prospect of forming a literary community.

As a writer with profound experience about refugee issue, Khaled Hosseini's descriptions resonate with people all over the world. On the purpose of writing *Sea Prayer*, he tries to send out the message that in our own species, people should have deeper understanding about others' lives, and find the common points of human nature, thus reducing the estrangement and difference between each other and realizing that those forcibly displaced persons should be entitled to live in dignity. In *Sea Prayer*, the father recalls that "we woke in the mornings, to the stirring of olive trees in the breeze, to the bleating of your grandmother's goat, the clanking of her cooking pots, the air cool and the sun a pale rim of persimmon to the east" (Khaled, 2018). Facing the despair of life, they have to make the choice of being refugees. They need to go far away from home, but cherish

the memory forever. The greatest wish of every refugee is to return his home.

At present, the refugee crisis has shown a global trend, which needs the joint efforts of international community. As the good voice of China which is issued by the Chinese government in the new era, the community of shared future for mankind has a certain guiding significance for the governance of the refugee crisis.

First of all, the value of international responsibility is in accordance with the concept of the community of shared future for mankind, which is helpful for European countries to break through the narrow vision of their own interests and actively assume the international responsibility for refugee crisis. All countries should take concerted actions in the face of this public crisis. Only in this way can the EU really play its role on effectively solving refugee crisis with coordination.

There is, in addition, another point to make. As the chief culprit of the refugee crisis, the United States constantly intervenes in the affairs of other countries by pleading that human rights are higher than sovereignty. Being a crucial capitalist country with comparatively economic and military advantages in the world today, it should play its role on holding compliance with international rules, getting along with other countries equally and friendly, and maintaining world peace and development. Ultimately, there has been a long-standing collision and struggle in the aspect of cultures among refugees' origin countries and European countries. Nevertheless, there are still some aspects that can be learned and integrated. For the governance of the refugee crisis, if European countries can change their ideas and adhere to the cultural concept of the community of shared future for mankind, they not only can help the refugees, but also bring positive effects on their labor shortage, economic development and cultural enrichment.

As one of the important participants in refugee affairs, China always insist on humanitarian principles and actively participates in the refugee governance worldwide. At the same time, China attaches great importance to tackle refugee problems. In practice, China mainly provides multilateral and bilateral humanitarian assistance to international organizations and related countries, focusing on the aid of food, medical care and living supplies to refugees from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine. Chinese government cooperates with UNICEF to provide targeted assistance for refugee children (Xing, 2020).

From the establishment of the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations to the concept of a community of shared future for mankind, it has become the consensus for the international community to cooperatively deal with global problems such as hunger, disease, natural disasters and man-made disasters. China has always regarded disaster assistance as a part of building a community with shared future for mankind, which is different from the exchanging or regulatory assistance of individual western countries. Chinese government advocates that all countries, big or small, rich or poor, should adopt the principle of non-discrimination, and fully respects the independence and territorial integrity of the countries that are rescued, so as to help them to get rid of a difficult

position.

As the new generation of the community of shared future for mankind, children should be paid more crucial attention. In the *Sea Prayer*, Khaled Hosseini expressed his expectations from the point of the father, that is “pray God steers the vessel true, when the shores slip out of eyesight, and we are a flyspeck in the heaving waters, pitching tilting easily swallowed. Because you, you are precious cargo, Marwan, the most precious there ever was. I pray the sea know this” (Khaled, 2018).

Taking Afghanistan as an example. The refugee crisis in this country has a long history. As early as the war in Afghanistan that broke out in the 1980s, millions of people became refugees. After entering into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Taliban, local warlords and drug lords are in turmoil, thus resulting in a long-term social unrest and a mass of displaced people. Not only can the U.S. military’s combat with the Taliban in Afghanistan not save the people, but also it brings disaster to the Afghan people. In the face of disasters in the neighboring country, the Chinese government actively helps Afghanistan to solve the domestic refugee problems, which is an important embodiment of positively fulfilling international humanitarian commitments.

In 1979, in response to the influx of refugees in Indochina, UNHCR came to work in China at the invitation of the Chinese government and became one of the first UN agencies in China. It has witnessed the great economic and social development of China, which has become an increasingly important partner for the UNHCR.

Sivanka Dhanapala, the representative of UNHCR in China said that he has felt the strong will of the Chinese government to contribute to global refugee affairs when he came to China, and sincerely hopes that China can become an increasingly important partner of the agency. To raise public awareness of refugee status and the underlying causes of being forced to be destitute and homeless, UNHCR aspires to achieve the goal on a global scale as well as in China, so as to arouse a sense of empathy: no one is willing to become a refugee.<sup>2</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

Khaled Hosseini’s work reflects the literary orientation of the community with a shared future for mankind by conforming to the discourse practice of a community of shared future for mankind. As a writer, his realization of refugee issue shows that literature should also take its responsibility to help the construction of a community of shared future for mankind. Although the causes of refugee children are very complicated and difficult in global governance of refugee problems, the idea of a community of shared future for mankind has answered the questions raised by the times, and reflected the law of the development in human society. Therefore, under the guidance of the idea of a community of

<sup>2</sup>Qian (2019). Special Reports on the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the United Nations in China. UNHCR and China: from Recipients to Partners—A Visit to Sivanka Dhanapala, the Representative of UNHCR in China.[EB]. <https://news.un.org/zh/story/2019/06/1034911>.

shared future for mankind, we need a global outlook on civilization and development, as well as empathic communication skills to deal with the refugee problems, especially refugee children.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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