

## Displacement, Exile and Nostalgia in Khaled Hosseini's novel *Sea Prayer*: A Necropolitical Perspective

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to undertake a Necropolitical reading of Khaled Hosseini's novel *Sea Prayer*. The text critiques the geopolitics of the countries which renders certain human lives disposable and valueless in the interest of modern capitalism and struggle for power. Syria became the battleground, more specifically a proxy war zone of different nations, rebel groups, civil militias, and terrorist organizations. Amidst the conflict and war, the civilians inside Syria decided to escape their unending suffering and started to migrate to neighbouring countries including Europe in a large scale. This study will draw on Achille Mbembe's concept of Necropolitics to analyse the portrayal of certain human lives as disposable in modern democracy, and to critique the worlds' indifference towards the suffering of these people. Necropolitics refers to the power dynamics in contemporary politics that disposes and exterminates certain human population that it considers inferior or no longer useful in the interest of modern capitalism and warfare. This study looks at the displacement and exile of these people as the disposal of certain unwanted population into "death worlds" like war zones and refugee camps, a physical space created to confine and expose to death the unwanted fraction of society.

**Keywords:** Displacement, Exile, Modern Capitalism, Necropolitics, Syrian Refugee Crisis

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### I. Introduction

Liberal democracy according to Mbembe, thrives on the extermination of certain human populations in the name of safeguarding the rights and freedom of some others. Syrian civil war can be regarded as one of the most devastating wars in the history of twenty first century where thousands of civilians lost their lives, became displaced, or refugees in other countries, and endured psychological trauma in their own homeland. The country became a proxy war zone of different parties including global superpowers, civil militias, different ethnic groups. Mbembe is deeply skeptical of liberal democracy as it is one that was born out of paradoxes like colonialism, slavery, and racism fostered by white supremacy. Mbembe(2003) coins the term Necropolitics to "account for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of *death-worlds*..." where exists various "forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living death" (p.40). The best representative of this "death-worlds" is the Nazi concentration camps, Mbembe asserts, a hellish space that exists between life and death, where the people are reduced to "living-dead", mere bodies that needs to be annihilated. According to Mbembe(2003), in modern democracy "the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" (p. 1). One such example of Necropolitics that Mbembe gives is the Israeli encroachment on Palestine in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*Sea Prayer* by Khaled Hosseini is an illustrated, short novel centred on the theme of Syrian refugee crisis where thousands of civilians drowned while trying to cross the Mediterranean sea into neighbouring countries including Europe. The novel was illustrated by Dan Williams in watercolour style, published as a book in 2018, inspired by the death of Alan Kurdi, a three-year old Syrian boy who drowned while trying to cross the sea into safety with thousand others. The novel is a short novel in form of a letter spoken by a father holding his son on a beach at night while waiting to undertake a sea voyage into another country at dawn. The father reflects on their life in Homs, and how their peaceful life there was shattered once the war broke out. The novel critiques the human indifference to the violence and death of other people, and portrays the unwavering human endurance and hope in the face of adversity. *Sea Prayer* captures the ineffable plights of the refugees and the suffering they had to go through in their life through the depiction of Marwan and his family. Marwan's father nostalgically reflects back to their childhood in Homs and the days spent in their grandfather's farm outside the town, how he and his brother would spread the mattress on the roof, and the slow fresh mornings they would wake up to the clanking of pots and the bleating of their grandmother's goat, with the olive tree tossing in the background with a gentle breeze. The narrator wishes if his son could remember their home as clearly as him.

The conflict in the country started from a school in Daraa, when one student who unwittingly wrote something on a wall offended the authoritarian regime of Bashar Al Assad, and the children from the school were brutally beaten by the regime. After witnessing the mass protests and the toppling of regimes by the citizens in neighbouring countries, the Bashar Al Assad regime was deeply suspicious of its own people lest their own citizens start the similar thing in the country. That particular incident and the violent response by the regime ignited people across the country to realize their own insignificance in the eyes of their dictator. The citizens were already discontent with how the Ba'athist party consisting majority of members from Shia minorities were treating or more precisely, mistreating the Sunni majorities that encompasses approximately eighty percent of the total population of Syria. So the revolution starts across the country in march 2011, met by a violent response and brutal crackdown by the state. But it only makes the matter worse for the regime as more people joined and their voices became louder. As time passes by, the conflicts doesn't arrive at an end as neither party surrenders, instead it escalates as more unwelcomed parties gets involved in the form of neighbouring countries, global superpowers, different militancy groups and organisations, and wrecks havoc to the entire country rendering it a battleground, a "death-world" where "new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*" (Mbembe 1).

Khaled Hosseini is an Afghan-American novelist, poet and human rights activist and his novels are deeply rooted in the experiences of the people in Afghanistan, and outside, amidst the wars, conflict and invasions. His works explore the unique individual experiences and suffering in contemporary world, the enduring legacy of human beings on the one hand, and the darker, evil side of certain individuals that takes pleasure in inflicting pain and suffering on the other. Hosseini is also the founder of Khaled Hosseini foundation for Refugees, and presently a Goodwill Envoy for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Hosseini has been deeply vocal about the suffering of refugees and the everlasting impact they have to go through including displacement, exile, and loss of identity. The refugee camps lack the basic human needs and they live in extreme poverty and bad health. Hosseini has remained one of the few authors to have sold millions of copies of their works worldwide. He is also a recipient of various notable literary awards including Exclusive Books Boeke prize, British Book award, Goodreads Choice Awards, and DSc Prize for South Asian Fiction. Some of the notable works of Hosseini are: *The Kite Runner* (2004), *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013), *Sea Prayer* (2018).

## **II. Methodology**

This paper is a textual as well as a visual analysis of the illustrated novel *Sea Prayer*. This paper relies on the theory of Achille Mbembe's Necropolitics to look at the broader issues of war and conflict in the contemporary politics that results in thousands of civilians being dead, displaced, or exterminated. The context of the text, that is the Syrian refugee crisis that pushed thousands of people to death, exile, and be refugees in other countries further allows this paper to strengthen Mbembe's claims of Necropolitics, that is, the power to decide who lives and who dies, or more specifically, to expose an entire population to death through the creation of "Death-worlds".

## **III. Discussion & Analysis**

Contemporary geopolitics makes it harder for people today to live a peaceful and normal life especially in third world countries. Middle East has been a battleground for countries to expand their influences and to exercise their sovereign powers through the means of various excuses. The conflict in Middle East, specifically in the twenty first century has been rapidly escalating through the years, and a vast population of people are exposed to death, displacement and poor living conditions under extreme poverty. One of the most destructive war in twenty first century was the Syrian Civil War. As a result of years of conflict and war, there was a huge influx of refugees fleeing Syria into the neighbouring countries including Europe. These civilians abandoned their home and risked their lives to cross the Mediterranean sea into another country in search of a home and safety. While some people managed to cross the sea successfully in their voyage, many drowned in the process. One among those people was the three-year old Alan Kurdi. His body was washed ashore after he was drowned. After his photos of being washed ashore were circulated, the world wept, questioning everything about where we stand as humanity. This incident is what inspired Khaled Hosseini to weave this poignant tale of a father and son in the midst of war and terror, still holding on to hope at a shot of better life abroad.

The novel is an amalgamation of personal and collective trauma that Marwan's family and the thousand others went through as a result of war and displacement. In the article titled *An Analysis of Personal and Collective Trauma in Khaled Hosseini's Novel Sea Prayer*, the authors attempt to study the amalgamation of trauma in the text. According to the authors, this novel is a portrayal of the immense suffering of the refugee and the traumas they endure afterwards: "Throughout the story, one can find the cycle of traumatic experiences. Both the narrator and his son Marwan are the voices of refugees and they depict the torments as being a

refugee”( Shoukat et al, p.120). Similarly, Amal Babu in his paper titled *Sea Prayer: An Illustrated Literary Narration on the Afflictions of Refugees* studies the illustrated novel as a medium to bring to light the plights of refugees because “one of the foremost advantages of illustrated editions is that they help the readers to watch and experience the narrative course of the work as it is in a movie or stage performance” and a flea to the world to come together as one and help these refugees, considering the fact that many nations closed their borders on these people and labelled them with derogatory names: “ Sea Prayer shows the importance of the revival of illustrated fiction into the world of adult’s fiction and urges for the united efforts from humankind to bring peace and harmony in the world”( p. 47).

The novel is written in a deeply emotional tone, full of hope and endurance, and begins with Marwan’s father looking back at their peaceful childhood in Homs before the war and destruction. He particularly remembers the time when he and his brother spent their childhood in their farmhouse outside of Homs. The father nostalgically reflects back to those happy times in his childhood following a Watercolour landscape painting of the rural scene: “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.” (Hosseini, 2018)

Following these lines, the narrator then proceeds to describe the landscape of the farmhouse with a vivid description of nature and the rustic scene. The narrator feels a deep sense of nostalgia towards his own past, particularly his childhood. The narrator goes on to describe the early morning scenes they woke up to; the gentle morning breeze stirring the olive branches, the clanking of pots, or their mother’s goat bleating, the sun “a pale rim of persimmon” in the east. After that the narrator recalls back to their trip to the farmhouse with Marwan as a toddler and his mother, and wishes that had Marwan been not so young he would remember this trip just as clearly. The narrative suddenly shifts to the city Homs as the readers follow through his memory; their trip to the city and Clock Tower square with his wife and son Marwan, where people of different religions and communities live in harmony. Then all of a sudden, there is protest and violence, and many people leaving their homes in search of a better life. The sky suddenly becomes black and grey, full of smoke: “The skies spitting bombs. Starvation. Burials” (Hosseini). It is contrasted with earlier depictions of the sky, full of yellow and orange skies before the war and unrest. This particular instance reflects how Mbembe(2003) asserts liberal democracy works in contemporary world. In this instance, “power continuously refers and appeals to exception, emergency, and fictionalized enemy. It also labors to produce that same exception, emergency, and fictionalized enemy” (p. 16). These lines are perfectly reminiscent of how America showered bombs in Syria with the excuse to exterminate the presence of Islamic states of Iran and Syria, killing thousands of innocent civilians in the process. This act renders the lives of the civilians as disposable and valueless in the face of modern warfare: “...the notion of necropolitics and necropower to account for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the maximum destruction of persons” (Mbembe,2003,p. 40).

The city of Homs, as portrayed in the novel becomes a “death-world”, created by the principles of geopolitics, where the children born during the time span of war knows nothing but “the skies spitting bombs” or “Starvation”, or the rows of “burials”; a literal “death-world” meant to dispose the entire population. One instance of this “death-world” is the Nazi concentration camps in Germany, where the Jews were confined and exterminated by the Nazis. According to Mbembe, this place exists between life and death, a place created to inflict maximum pain. The people living in these places including prisons, refugee camps, war torn places exist between life and death, devoid of hope. They altogether lose their identities, their social and political status. Plantation slaves are one such instance of the “living dead”, existing between life and death, where they live without autonomy, as commodities, and their bodies are whipped and tortured upon by the owners. The hometown of narrator, that is Homs, becomes a “death-world” for the people living there amidst the war, where the children including Marwan have learned that “dark blood is better news than bright” which suggests that it is better to die instantly than be injured and meet a slow and painful death there. The children know nothing of peace and harmony like the narrator did in his childhood but only things like how bomb craters can form a “swimming hole” large enough to fit the children to go swimming. The novel describes life amidst the devastating war through the narrative of Marwan’s father, a place where “mothers and/ sisters and classmates” are found under the concretes and bricks fallen to death. The image follows a group of children and two women sitting while the other woman holds a child in her lap taking shelter inside what seems like a destroyed building. The women seem desperate and hopeless while sitting. The immediate image that follows after this is the mass exodus of the people on foot. While some are carrying their bags in their head, some women are holding their children, and some people just walks. These people after being displaced and exiled loses their identity as well as their place in the society. The term “refugee” itself is derogatory and it symbolizes their expulsion from society and reflects a “social death” similar to those of slaves in plantations that Mbembe talks about. These people are alienated from society the moment they become refugees in other countries.

The people including Marwan and his father arrive at a beach at night with thousands of others waiting for sunrise to cross the sea. Among them are crying babies and the women full of uncertainty, people of different ethnicities including “Afghans, Somalis, and Iraqis and/ Eritreans and Syrians”, all devoid of hope. The next page follows Marwan and his father, as he stands holding Marwan to his chest. The father tells Marwan that he can feel his mother’s presence with them at the beach which immediately informs the reader that Marwan’s mother is dead. He grapples with the feeling of losing a loved one. As they wait for sunrise to undertake the sea journey in “search of home”, they are full of dread and uncertainty. The narrator tells his son how the world labels them with different names and abandoned to die considering the fact that countries closed their borders on them during the crisis: “I have heard it said we are the uninvited./ We are the unwelcome. We should take our misfortune elsewhere.”(Hosseini,2018 ). These instance mirrors what Mbembe has called “Nanoracism”, that is the continuation of colonial legacy that stems from stereotypes and prejudice against other races and ethnicities. Furthermore, Nanoracism not only seeks to keep exploiting those people that they once colonized, it seeks to dispose or deport them- Africans, Arabs, and Muslims- to the margins like camps. Mbembe takes the notion of biopower from Foucault and examines how race plays a significant role in it. Mbembe(2003) asserts: “After all, more so than class thinking (the ideology that defines history as an economic struggle of classes), race has been the ever present shadow in western political thought and practice, especially when it comes to imagining the inhumanity of, or rule over, foreign peoples.” (p. 17). This also accounts for why people in the contemporary world tolerates violence. Modern state exercises sovereignty, that is “expressed predominantly as the right to kill”, to dispose of certain populations while protecting some others. The father tells Marwan what his mother would say if she was alive, that the world doesn’t know about the suffering and pain that they have endured, and that if the world saw even half of what they have endured they would surely help: “Oh, but if they saw my darling./Even half of what you have./ If only they saw/ They would say kinder things, surely” (Hosseini, 2018) Mbembe asserts that his concern is the kind of sovereignty “whose central project is not the struggle for autonomy but the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations” (p. 14). What Mbembe means by this is that modern state exercises its power on people and their bodies, instrumentalizing human population for their own interests and purposes. This is reminiscent of the narrator’s hometown Homs, where they used to live. That home was destroyed with bombs and explosives: “The skies spitting bombs”, making holes big enough to let the children go swimming: “You know a bomb crater/ can be made into a swimming hole.” (Hosseini,2018). There are only “starvation” and “burials” in Homs now amidst the war in contrast to the peaceful life earlier. Furthermore, Mbembe(2003) asserts that “The perception of the existence of the Other as an attempt on my life, as a moral threat or absolute danger whose biophysical elimination would strengthen my potential to life and security”, which underscores the idea that “sovereignty consists of the will and the capacity to kill in order to live” (Mbembe, 2003,p. 18). The indifferent attitude that the world showed these people by closing its borders and leaving them to die underpins this idea: “I have heard it said we are the uninvited./ We are the unwelcome. We should take our misfortune elsewhere.” (Hosseini,2018).

In order to trace the presence of sovereignty in colonial legacy, Mbembe examines Giorgio Agamben’s notion of “the state of exception”, a point in which the judicial order is temporarily suspended due to an emergency or a major crisis, and argues how biopolitics has always existed. He takes the instance of slavery in the plantations. The slaves in the plantations live in a “form of death-in-life” where the plantation owners keep them “alive but in a *state of injury*, in a phantom-like world of horrors and intense cruelty and profanity”( Mbembe 21). The figure of the slave is shadowy that results from triple loss: “loss of ‘home’, loss of rights over his or her body, and loss of political status.”( Mbembe,2003,p. 21). Similarly, the lives of the refugees are no different from those of slaves. They experience the same triple loss in their journey: first; they are displaced and exiled, second; they lose their autonomy over their bodies i.e forced to do sex works to feed themselves, or exposed to harsh and toxic environment that gradually degrades their health, living in malnutrition etc, third and final; the loss of political status as citizens and becoming “refugees”, a term referred to “a person forced to flee their country because of violence or persecution” by UNHCR. Although International law preserves special laws for the protection of refugees, these are hardly followed by any nation.

As the narrator waits for daylight with thousand others to cross the sea, he prays that “God steers the vessel true” as they sail away. The narrator looks at the sea and feels intimidated by the depth and vastness of it. He feels powerless against the force of nature and prays: Because all I can think tonight is/ how deep the sea,/ How powerless I am to protect you from it”(Hosseini,2003). He reaffirms that Marwan is “a precious cargo” and he hopes the sea knows this and lets them cross in safety.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

*Sea Prayer* is a powerful tale of love and endurance, depicted through the narrative in form of a letter and through the watercolour illustrations that perfectly captures those emotions of the narrator’s words. The

watercolour style of these paintings also suggests the evanescent nature of memories, that is, memories also blur and fade away with time. Marwan's father can hardly remember events from his past as clearly as before. He is starting to forget, and the memories are becoming a distant dream even for him. As Haruki Murakami said "Memories warm you up from the inside but they also tear you apart", the narrator also finds comfort in his past but it also makes him nostalgic and sad. *Sea Prayer* is a poignant tale of exile and displacement of thousand others like Marwan's family, who lost their home, identity and loved ones to war. In the war among countries, different ethnic and militia groups, the civilians become the collateral damage, their lives deemed disposable in modern geopolitics. Despite all odds, Marwan's family and thousand others like their family keep hope alive.

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