
THE COST OF INACTION: PARALLELS BETWEEN BEFORE THE LAW AND THE KITE RUNNER

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ABSTRACT

“There is way to be good again¹.” – Khaled Hosseini, The Kite Runner

Regret is a universal human experience, and sometimes, we experience regret as the cost of inaction and it makes home in our heart and mind for a lifetime. It is something that stays with us in the back of our minds and we cannot escape it no matter how much we want it to. In Franz Kafka’s parable *Before the Law* and Khaled Hosseini’s novel *The Kite Runner*, both protagonists face the devastating consequences of hesitation and fear. One man waits his entire life for an opportunity that, according to him, never comes but is hidden in plain sight the whole time and on the other hand, another man deals with the guilt of past mistakes and dares to seek redemption. These stories are vastly different in style and setting, but both of them explore human flaws and the consequences of missed chances, that is, the regret that comes with it.

This paper delves into the thematic parallels between *Before the Law* and *The Kite Runner*, particularly how fear, in some situations, prevents characters from making vital decisions and how guilt builds the characters’ lives. In Kafka’s parable he warned about how inaction leads to irreversible loss, while Hosseini offers a contrasting perspective – redemption is still possible despite past failures.

While Kafka’s protagonist remains trapped by fear until its final moments, Amir chooses to confront his past, demonstrating that while some doors close forever, other can still be reopened only if you are brave enough to acknowledge and actualize the mistakes made by you. Kafka’s character is burdened with hesitation, fear and what not, which is why he never takes a step forward, eventually leading to death without accessing law. His fate highlights the permanent consequences of inaction, showing the idea that some opportunities, once lost, can never

1. Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*, (New Delhi: Bloomsbury Publishing India, 2013), 177

reclaimed. In contrast, Amir's journey in *The Kite Runner* shows that despite of the deep-rooted guilt and past mistakes, redemption remains possible for who actively seek it.

Amir's decision to return to Afghanistan and rescue Sohrab symbolizes his willingness to make up for his past failures, proving that fear may lead to delay in action but it doesn't have to define one's future. *The Kite Runner* offers a contrasting perspective to Kafka's acceptance of the inevitable. By examining these themes through key quotes and analysis, this paper highlights the complexities of human experiences. It explores how hesitation leads to irreversible loss, as seen in *Before the Law*, while also considering the possibility of making up for one's past mistakes, as portrayed in *The Kite Runner*. The parallels of these two narratives invites the question: What do *Before the Law* and *The Kite Runner* show us about what happens when we fail to act? Can we ever make things right, or are some chances lost forever? As Kafka writes, "This entrance was meant only for you. I am going to shut it now².

² Franz Kafka, "Before the Law," in *The Originals: Franz Kafka Selected Works* (New Delhi: Om Books International, 2021), 23

Introduction

“I wondered if that was how forgiveness budded; not with the fanfare of epiphany, but with pain gathering its things, packing up, and slipping away unannounced in the middle of the night³.” – Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*

In literature, inaction is often seen as a defining force in character's lives. This same inaction leaves them either with irreversible consequences as we saw in *Before the Law* or with opportunities for redemption, as portrayed in *The Kite Runner*. Franz Kafka's *Before the Law* and Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* are profoundly different yet thematically similar as they both talk about inaction. Kafka's parable tells the story of a man who waits his entire life for permission to access the law, only to realize too late that it was available to him, and only him, all along. On the other hand, Hosseini's novel revolves around Amir, the protagonist who spends his majority of childhood and adulthood haunted by the failure to act when his dear friend and half-brother Hassan was assaulted in front of his own eyes. Amir, unlike Kafka's protagonist, eventually confronts his past by going back to his homeland Afghanistan years after they bolted away because of Taliban attack. Although, these two texts have vastly different contexts but they share a central concern: the cost of inaction and the possibility – or impossibility – of redemption.

This research examines how both texts portray fear as a barrier to action as well as guilt as a driving force leading towards the final decision by a person. Kafka's perspective suggests that hesitation may cause permanent loss and warns us that some opportunities, if missed, can never be recovered. As the gatekeeper in *Before the Law* tells the man, “Here no one else can gain entry, since this entrance was assigned only to you. I'm now going to shut it⁴.” This moment encapsulates the result of inaction. Hosseini, on the other hand, offers a contrasting viewpoint,

³ Khaled Hosseini, “*The Kite Runner*,” (New Delhi: Bloomsbury Publishing India, 2013), 329

⁴ Franz Kafka, “*Before the Law*,” in *The Originals: Franz Kafka Selected Works* (New Delhi: Om Books International, 2021), 23

presenting redemption as a journey that is filled with obstacles, melancholy, fear and a bitter kind of nostalgia but yet, an achievable one. Amir's realisation in *The Kite Runner* – "There is a way to be good again⁵." – symbolizes that one can make up for the past mistakes by correcting them if they want to and are brave enough to do so. By comparing these works, this paper determines whether second chances exist at all or whether, in some cases, regret is the only outcome of inaction.

Ultimately, *Before the Law* and *The Kite Runner* present readers with a fundamental question: Is it ever too late to act? The answer, as these texts suggest, depends not only on the nature of the opportunity but also on the courage and willingness of the individual standing before it.

⁵ Khaled Hosseini, "*The Kite Runner*," (New Delhi: Bloomsbury Publishing India, 2013), 177

Literature Review: Fear, Guilt, and Redemption in Kafka and Hosseini's work

"A man who has no conscience, no goodness, does not suffer⁶." – Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*

In both *Before the Law* and *The Kite Runner*, inaction carries severe consequences, whether it results in existential despair or a long journey leading towards redemption. Scholars have been debating and discussing about the psychological and philosophical origins of fear, guilt, and missed opportunities in literature. Kafka's works have been reviewed and analysed with the point of view of how a person is responsible for creating purpose or meaning of their own life, while Hosseini's novel has been reviewed in terms of personal and collective redemption. However, there remains a gap in comparative studies that analyse both texts parallelly, particularly in how inaction is a defining force in human experience.

Fear as a Barrier to Action

Fear, as mentioned prior as well, plays a crucial role in shaping both protagonists' fates, yet scholars have interpreted and still interpret it differently. Kafka's protagonist reinforces the idea that hesitation leads to inevitable loss. The gatekeeper's final words – "No one else could ever be admitted here, since this gate was made only for you. I am now going to shut it⁷." – serves as some sort of haunting confirmation that opportunities, once missed, cannot be reclaimed. On the other hand, Hosseini presents a more dynamic struggle with fear that does not necessarily result in the state of feeling stuck. Amir initially succumbs to his fear when he fails to save and protect Hassan, admitting, "I had one last chance to make a decision. One final opportunity to decide who I was going to be. I could step into that alley, stand up for Hassan –

⁶ Khaled Hosseini, "*The Kite Runner*," (New Delhi: Bloomsbury Publishing India, 2013), 276

⁷ Franz Kafka, "*Before the Law*," in *The Originals: Franz Kafka Selected Works* (New Delhi: Om Books International, 2021), 23

the way he'd stood up for me all those times in the past – or I could run. In the end, I ran⁸.” His choice was to run away, to bolt away, not knowing that the guilt of bolting away will come crawling back to him every time he tries to sleep or think or eat or drink or sleep. Eventually, Amir, unlike Kafka's protagonist, confronts his past rather than remaining forever caged by it.

Guilt and the Burden of Memory

Both Kafka and Hosseini explore how guilt comes with the avoidance of action. In *Before the Law*, guilt is implicit – the protagonist seems to be crushed under the psychological wait of a life spent waiting. Scholar Thomas Hill escribes this as “A guilt that stems not from wrongdoing, but from never daring to act at all⁹.” Looking at the other side of the coin, Amir's guilt in *The Kite Runner* is explicit, self-destroying and gut-wrenching. His confession – “That was a long time ago, but it's wrong what they say about the past, I've learned, about how you can bury it. Because the past claws its way out¹⁰.” – illustrates how guilt is something we cannot escape no matter how much we want to. This inescapable guilt demands amendments rather than passive suffering which occurs due to inaction of a person. Unlike Kafka's protagonist, who waits until death, Amir recognizes that inaction is not the solution for this never seem to be ending guilt but redemption is.

Redemption: A lost cause or a Path Forward?

As we have discussed before as well, Kafka suggests that some chances are lost forever while, Hosseini leaves room for redemption. Kafka's protagonist portrays the consequences of a life time spent waiting for permission rather than seizing the opportunities that are hidden in plain sight. The closing moment of the parable, where the gate shuts forever, highlights irrevocable loss. In contrast, Amir's journey presents an alternative perspective. Rahim Khan's words –

⁸ Khaled Hosseini, “*The Kite Runner*,” (New Delhi: Bloomsbury Publishing India, 2013), 72

⁹ Scholar Thomas Hill

¹⁰ Khaled Hosseini, “*The Kite Runner*,” (New Delhi: Bloomsbury Publishing India, 2013), 1

“There is way to be good again¹¹.” – serves as a turning point. This redevelops the novel’s belief that even if redemption is painful, it is still possible for the ones who seek it.

While direct comparative studies between Franz Kafka’s *Before the Law* and Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* are evidently very less, the theme of inaction and its cost has been explored in relation to *The Kite Runner* alongside other literary works such as Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* showing how protagonists’ hesitations lead to personal tragedies. Since, there is a very little attention given to comparative and descriptive analysis of *Before the Law* and *The Kite Runner*, this paper seeks to bridge that gap by exploring human complexities as such hesitation, guilt and redemption through a philosophical and psychological perspective.

¹¹ Khaled Hosseini, “*The Kite Runner*,” (New Delhi: Bloomsbury Publishing India, 2013), 177

Methodology

This research engages into a comparative literary analysis approach to examine the themes of fear, guilt, inaction, and redemption. The central concept of usual Kafka works is existentialism while *The Kite Runner* is based on the framework of moral redemption.

This study uses close reading as a method to analyse textual details such as language, symbolism, and narrative structure. A kind of emphasis is given to key quotes and their relation to the broader themes of the texts. Additionally, this paper also talks about the thematic comparison, juxtaposing Kafka's deterministic worldview with Hosseini's moral philosophy.

Through this research, we want to uncover whether humans are powerful and brave enough for redemption – or if some doors, once closed, remain forever shut.

Between Fear and Redemption: A Comparative Discussion of Kafka and Hosseini

“For you, a thousand times over¹².” – Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*

Fear, guilt, and redemption are central forces that shape human lives, yet literature offers conflicting perspectives on whether past mistakes can be rectified. Franz Kafka's *Before the Law* and Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* present two opposing yet complementary viewpoints of inaction and its cost. This section explores these contrasting perspectives through the lenses of fear, guilt, redemption, and the philosophical implications of action versus inaction.

Fear and Inaction: The Paralysis of Choice

Both *Before the Law* and *The Kite Runner* illustrate how fear leads to hesitation, shaping the lives of their protagonists. Kafka's protagonist, a man seeking access to the law, spends an entire lifetime waiting for permission that never comes. His hesitation of going into the gates of law is not merely passive – it is a form of self-imposed restrictions and obligations. He doesn't question the gatekeeper's authority, nor does he rebel and attempts to cross or bypass him. The man's fear of challenging the administration and its authority keeps him trapped in a state of constant waiting and no results.

As Kafka writes, “Before the Law sits a gatekeeper. To this gatekeeper comes a man from the country who asks to gain entry into the law. But the gatekeeper says that he cannot grant him entry at the moment. The man thinks about it and then asks if he will be allowed to come in sometime later on. ‘It is possible,’ says the gatekeeper, ‘but not now.’¹³” It symbolizes the

¹² Khaled Hosseini, “*The Kite Runner*,” (New Delhi: Bloomsbury Publishing India, 2013), 63

¹³ Franz Kafka, “*Before the Law*,” in *The Originals: Franz Kafka Selected Works* (New Delhi: Om Books International, 2021), 22

arbitrary obstacles that individuals often perceive as impossible to overcome and this prevents them from being decisive.

Similarly, in *The Kite Runner*, Amir's initial failure to act is fuelled by fear – fear of intervening when Hassan is assaulted, fear of disappointing his father, and fear of facing the truth. Unlike Kafka's protagonist, Amir's story does not end in perpetual waiting. His fear of dealing with Assef and disappointment in his father's eyes leads him to betray Hassan, moreover it also puts in motion a journey toward redemption. Amir looks back on to the day when something cold and dark took root in him after he witnessed Hassan getting assaulted, "I became what I am today at the age of twelve, on a frigid overcast day in the winter of 1975¹⁴." This moment mirrors Kafka's theme of missed opportunities, yet unlike Kafka's protagonist, Amir is given – and ultimately takes another chance.

Guilt and Regret: A Life defined by the past

Guilt is a defining force in both texts, but it manifests differently in each protagonist. Kafka's man at the gate, waiting for the gatekeeper to let him in, does not explicitly express guilt; rather, his life-long hesitation becomes an on-going silent form of regret. His fate suggests that some choices, once avoided, can never be revisited.

Amir, on the other hand, carries the weight of his guilt actively. Him witnessing Hassan's assault and then becoming an insomniac, a loner and a person who isolates themselves between the pages of the books from their mother's library shows how soul-destroying, gut-wrenching and haunting the guilt trip would have been. This guilt shapes his relationships and self-worth in the near future. "There is way to be good again¹⁵," Rahim Khan tells him, offering a path toward redemption that Kafka's protagonist never receives. The difference between the two characters lies in their response to regret: one remains trapped in hesitation, while the other seeks a way to atone.

¹⁴ Khaled Hosseini, *"The Kite Runner,"* (New Delhi: Bloomsbury Publishing India, 2013), 1

¹⁵ Khaled Hosseini, *"The Kite Runner,"* (New Delhi: Bloomsbury Publishing India, 2013), 177

Redemption and Lost Chances: Kafka's Fatalism vs. Hosseini's Hope

Hosseini's belief in redemption contrasts with Kafka's existential fatalism. In *Before the Law*, the protagonist's moment of realisation comes too late when the gatekeeper tells him that that this door was meant for you but I am going to shut it now. His fate suggests that some chances, once lost, creates regret.

Hosseini's narrative, however, offers a different perspective. Amir's path to redemption is not immediate or easy, but it is possible. He journeyed back to Afghanistan in order to meet Rahim Khan, his father's best friends and Hassan, his long-lost childhood best friend who also happens to be his half-brother. Later, through Rahim Khan, Amir gets to know that Hassan and his better half has been killed by Taliban Terrorists and they also have confined Sohrab, Hassan's son. Then he goes to rescue Sohrab from Taliban and gets to know that the central power behind abducting orphans is none other than Assef. When he takes the beating from Assef, he finds a twisted sense of relief, as if suffering is the price he must pay for his mistakes. "For the first time since the winter of 1975, I felt at peace. My body was broken – just how badly I wouldn't find out until later – but I felt healed. Healed at last¹⁶." Unlike Kafka's man, Amir actively works to right his wrongs, reinforcing Hosseini's message that redemption is attainable for those who seek it.

Philosophical Contradictions: Can one ever truly make amends?

The fundamental question that arises from both texts is whether redemption is always possible or if some mistakes are irreversible. Kafka's text suggests that opportunities, once lost, cannot be reclaimed. His protagonist's failure to act lead him to regret.

Hosseini, however, proposes a more refined perspective. While *The Kite Runner* acknowledges the weight of past mistakes, it also asserts that redemption might be difficult to reach but its not beyond reach. The novel challenges the notion of fate, suggesting that individuals, do in

¹⁶ Khaled Hosseini, "*The Kite Runner*," (New Delhi: Bloomsbury Publishing India, 2013), 265

fact have the power, to reshape their own narratives. The contradictory points between the two works invites reflection on the nature of human choice: Is there always a way to be good again, or are some chances lost forever?

As Kafka's protagonist learns too late that the door was there for him and only him all along but he never stepped through. Amir, in contrast, embraces the obstacle-filled road to redemption, proving that while some mistakes leave lasting scars, they do not have to define one's entire life.

Fate, Free Will, and the Burden of responsibility

A deeper read through of these texts brings forth the question of fate versus free will. Kafka's existentialist approach which is also evident in his other works such as *The Trial* and *The Metamorphosis* implies that individuals caged by their own hesitations, ultimately give in to fear. The man in *Before the Law* believes that he has no control over his own destiny and places his entire trust in an administration system that eventually never grants him access to the law. He gave in to fear and hesitation because of which he failed to challenge the authority. This failure became a self-fulfilling prophecy showing that waiting leads only to regret.

Amir, on the other hand, initially surrenders to fear and guilt. Although, he eventually exercises his free will to change the course of his life. His actions suggest that no matter how much you want to, you still cannot escape the responsibility of redemption of your past mistakes and that redemption is an on-going process. "When you tell a lie, you steal someone's right to the truth¹⁷," Baba tells Amir early in the novel, hinting at his son's journey to moral maturity.

Ultimately, both the texts explore the burden of choice in different manner. Kafka, basically warns us about the fact that the failure to act results in an unfulfilled life. Hosseini, on the other hand, acknowledges the fact that people might bolt away from the actions that they are supposed to perform but there is always a way towards atonement. Together, these works

¹⁷ Khaled Hosseini, "*The Kite Runner*," (New Delhi: Bloomsbury Publishing India, 2013), 17

present a very intriguing discussion on whether individuals are doomed by their past or if they possess the power to shape their own redemption.

“Your father, like you, were a tortured soul, Rahim Khan had written in his letter. Maybe so. We had both sinned and betrayed. But Baba had found a way to create good out of his remorse. What had I done, other than take my guilt out on very same people I had betrayed, and then try to forget it all? What had I done, other than become an insomniac?”¹⁸ – Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*

¹⁸ Khaled Hosseini, *“The Kite Runner,”* (New Delhi: Bloomsbury Publishing India, 2013), 278

Conclusion

“Everyone strives after the law, so how is it that in these many years no one except me has requested entry?¹⁹” – Franz Kafka, *Before the Law*

Kafka’s protagonist questions why he alone has sought entry, yet he never truly challenges the barriers before him. This paradox reflects the broader human tendency to desire change while fearing the risks that comes with action. His hesitation mirrors Amir’s initial failure in *The Kite Runner*, where fear and guilt prevent him from making the right choices. However, unlike Kafka’s protagonist, Amir eventually decided to deal with the guilt and fear he has been bolting from since 1975, demonstrating that while fear can delay action, it does not have to define one’s fate.

Both texts explore the weight of inaction, but with different conclusions. Kafka’s story suggests that once an opportunity is lost, it is lost forever, while Hosseini’s narrative asserts that redemption is still possible, even after deep rooted guilt of years. This contrast highlights a central question in literature and philosophy, the question that was the main basis of this research: Can past mistakes ever be fully atoned for, or are some doors permanently closed?

Future studies could examine the themes of fear, regret and redemption in more detailed manner. Ultimately, both Kafka and Hosseini challenge readers to confront their own fear and other dilemmas, asking whether they will act before it is too late – or remain waiting at the gate.

“But time can be a greedy thing – sometimes it steals the details for itself²⁰.” – Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*

¹⁹ Franz Kafka, “*Before the Law*,” in *The Originals: Franz Kafka Selected Works* (New Delhi: Om Books International, 2021), 23

²⁰ Khaled Hosseini, “*The Kite Runner*,” (New Delhi: Bloomsbury Publishing India, 2013), 198