



## The choice of responsibility and freedom in an existential lifestyle: A study of Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

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### Abstract

Khaled Hosseini's novel, *The Kite Runner* is a universal portrait of human life. It culminates the broader picture of modern individuals as notoriously hostile, depersonalized with changing values, discontent and psychologically maladjusted. The novel written and published immediately after 9/11 is historic in being written at the right time in the right place. The 9/11 tragedy led to the biggest existential crisis in the modern world depicting the many errors of human choices to attain freedom. What perhaps the modern individual did not understand was the fact that the real freedom is the realisation of one's responsibility of action towards oneself and all others connected to that self. This paper thus is an attempt to highlight the equation of responsibility and freedom. The article deals with the importance and essence of responsibility in the context of existential idea of the novel that responsibility of action can help to overcome the anguish of existential crisis and lead to freedom.

**Keywords:** existential cognito, absurdity, responsibility

### Introduction

The most compassionate and venerable of all mortals, the Buddha opposed all reliance on the divine because he wanted human beings to realise the complete responsibility of their actions. Buddha's doctrine may not talk about the existentialism that Sartre defines. The "diligence" in Buddha's Dhammapada is definitely uncharacteristic of Sartre's existentialism. Buddha's radical dictum is greater than the quintessence of Sartre's thought; yet both Buddha and Sartre conclude—"All that we are is the result of what we have thought" (Kauffmann 46). Sartre is not the image of Buddha, "he is not saintly but aggressively human" (Kauffmann 46); but like Buddha he believes in the choices of the individual and says "Life begins on the other side of despair" (Kauffmann 46). Real freedom begins where despair ends; yet despair and anguish, as Sartre states, is the manifestation of this freedom, because when consciously analyzed despair manifests a realisation that points towards the individual's responsibility of a wrong choice.

Existentialism is not a passive philosophy; it is a practicing thought. As Walter Kauffmann says, "Existentialism should be lived to be really sincere. To live as an existentialist means to be ready to pay for this view and not to lay it down in books" (Kauffmann 47). The philosophy as a doctrine affirms that every truth and every action implies both an environment and a human subjectivity, thus "it is senseless to think of complaining since nothing alien has decided what we feel, what we live or what we are" (Palmer 99). There are no innocent victims, for every individual defines himself by a choice that always has an alternative to change the course of individual despair. "If a man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. . . . He is what he wills, and as he conceives

himself after already existing . . ." (Kauffmann 349). Choice and responsibility of an action thus determines individual essence and its progress towards the real freedom.

The story in Khaled Hosseini's debut novel, *The Kite Runner*, is a universal portrait of human life. It culminates the broader picture of modern individuals as notoriously hostile, depersonalized with changing values, discontent and psychologically maladjusted. The novel written and published immediately after 9/11 is historic in being written at the right time and in the right place. The 9/11 tragedy led to the biggest existential crisis in the modern world depicting the many errors of human choice in the attainment of freedom. Hosseini's characters lose themselves in the labyrinth of life. They search for meaning and purpose in life but wish to be uninvolved in the same. His protagonist, Amir, commits a series of wrong choices, upsurges his conscious freedom and after twenty three years of anguished living finally moves towards his freedom only after he realises the responsibility of his action. Being born as a human infant Amir does not adhere to any category of human temperament or human nature at the time and moments after his birth. Like all other human beings he remains an indescribable individual. His self- definition as a human occurs from the time he starts existing as a young boy full of desire and wrong choices. The moment Amir hides the knowledge of his consciousness in self-deception he is defined by it. However as the wise Rahim Khan tells not once but twice "There is a way to be good again" (Hosseini 2), there is always a way to change the choice one has made. "The choice is living and consequently can be revoked by the subject who is being studied" (Sartre). "Each human being," Sartre states "creates and re-creates his or her essence in every moment" (Palmer 25), so ". . . that there is always a possibility for the coward to give up cowardice and for the hero to stop being a hero" (Kauffmann 360).

Amir is not a coward by nature but by choice of action as he defines himself on the night of his marriage proposal—‘Khastagiri’ saying, “I opened my mouth and almost told her how I’d betrayed Hassan, lied, driven him out, and destroyed a forty-year relationship between Baba and Ali. But I didn’t. I suspected there were many ways in which Soraya Taheri was a better person than me. Courage was one of them” (Hosseini 152). When anguish manifests his realisation of the reality of knowledge, Amir changes his way of action. On being presented with a third choice in the form of Rahim Khan’s phone call, Amir takes responsibility of all his actions that had begun on the winter of 1975. Later while leaning against the clay wall of Wahid’s house Amir, as a man who has fixed his eyes on the horizon of his chosen destiny, marvels at something that may stand as Buddha’s doctrine of the cycle of life. He says,

I looked westward and marvelled that, somewhere over those mountains, Kabul still existed. It really existed, not just as an old memory, or as a heading of an AP story on page 15 of the San Francisco Chronicle. Somewhere over those mountains in the west slept the city where my hare lipped brother and I had run kites. Somewhere over there, the blind-folded man from my dream had died a needless death. Once over those mountains, I had made a choice. And now, a quarter of a century later, that choice had landed me right back on the soil. (Hosseini 222)

Like the practicing existentialist Amir comes to the realisation that nobody can take over the work that has become his responsibility. It is he himself that must face the situation he had tried to avoid for years. His conscious mind finally finds his original project and the journey to Afghanistan becomes less for the sake of Shorab than for the sake of redemption and real freedom. Real freedom, Amir realises, sitting on the dust and soil of his motherland, is a redemption that constitutes the burden of entire mankind, thus real freedom cannot be individualistic or selfish. Since “we are” according to Sartre “condemned to be free” our choices should not be a burden on mankind rather our freedom should be a responsibility that involves all mankind. In that final flight from Pakistan to Afghanistan Amir leaves behind his anguish and with Shorab beside him on the warm sunny day and luckily enough Amir ultimately finds his freedom in the loop side smile of Shorab. “Hardly there. But there” (Hosseini 340).

Amir’s walk in the “northern edge of the Golden Gate Park” (Hosseini 1) makes an important psychological imprint in his conscious mind. He finally comes to term with a realisation of his responsibility which Sartre describes as, “. . . when we say “I think” we are attaining to ourselves in the presence of the other, and we are just as certain of the other as we are of ourselves. Thus the man who discovers himself directly in the *cognito* also discovers all the others, and discovers them as the condition of his own existence” (Kauffmann 361). Amir realises that his anguish does not end with himself, it extends out as a result of his action to all those that are in touch with his life. His condition of existence becomes their condition of existence, his action leads to anguish not only to his own self but to all those he lives with, and thus his responsibility includes all the life that he is connected with.

Hosseini begins his story with Amir’s realisation and his confession as a manifestation of individual responsibility of any situation. Amir accepts the fact that, “I became what I am today at the age of twelve, on a frigid overcast day in the winter of 1975” (Hosseini 1). Acceptance of action and responsibility of a situation created by an individual’s choice plays a big role in the attainment of real freedom. This ‘responsibility’ in existentialism stands opposed to the ‘Philosophy of Quietism’ which states the rule “let others do what I cannot do” (Kauffmann 358). In his self-deception Amir follows the fruitless result of Quietism. Just like the other characters of Hosseini’s story he forces the gap of time to ease the pain and anguish caused due to his action. Amir, like Sartre’s anguished man goes on to blame, crying out “Circumstances have been against me, I was worthy to be something much better than I have been” (Kauffmann 358). However, the phone call from Rahim Khan, after sixteen years of struggle and living in bad-faith marks the final step in Amir’s realisation that there is still choices to be made which can revoke his action and redeem himself in his own eyes. But this responsibility comes with its own selfish demure. In the existential world the virtue and vice of freedom and responsibility gets exchanged so that freedom becomes more generous and responsibility becomes a little selfish. At the beginning of the story an irresponsible Amir negates his freedom and blames the society for his action. This however leads to more despair to the point that he wanted to escape from all his action.

Amir is a perfect example of an anguished man until his conscious mind finally breaks from its shadow of self-deception and reflects back the brutal truth of his behaviour. In his recognition of his original self as a pretender and a coward through his own action, Amir traces the source of all his anguish to his action and choices. A series of events following the phone call lead to Amir’s total acceptance of his responsibility. First the walk in the park frees Amir’s conscience from the shadowy self-deception. Next when Amir agrees to Rahim Khan’s suggestion of rescuing Shorab from Afghanistan his consciousness seeks to determine the “original project” of the individual. He takes full responsibility, which has always been his original project, to end the cycle of lies, betrayals, and secrets that had begun with a “singing Hazara woman” (Hosseini 209) nursing both him and Hassan. Crossing the international boundaries of Pakistan into the turmoil of Afghanistan Amir ironically moves towards his freedom. It is ironic because Amir was shackled in his disbelief when his fatherland was free; but the very same country now shackled with the imposed Islamic law of sharia’ah delivers Amir to his freedom; his long lost sleep of twenty three years. He thinks, “*I can’t go to Kabul, I had said to Rahim Khan. I have a wife in America, a home, a career and a family. But how could I pack up and go back home when my actions may have cost Hassan a chance at those very same things?*” (Hosseini 209) Amir’s plunge into the irresponsible defines his self-committal, as existence choosing its essence. Amir narrates his thoughts as,

Thoughts were flying around in my head, but I didn’t want to think at all, because a sober part of me knew that what I had managed to get myself into was insanity. I was

thousands of miles from my wife, sitting in a room that felt like a holding cell, waiting for a man I had seen murder two people that same day. It was insanity worse yet it was irresponsible. (Hosseini 252-53)

Amir's actions show him as a changed person and sitting on Assef's living room he himself comes to acknowledge it as, "This isn't you, Amir, part of me said. You're gutless. It's how you were made...Nothing wrong with cowardice as long as it comes with prudence. But when a coward stops remembering who he is. . . God help him" (Hosseini 253). Somewhere in between Peshawar and Kabul Amir redefines himself through the choice of his action, he decides not to be a coward but to become the hero of his own story; a hero unto himself. Once in Afghanistan the sheer insanity of a desperate man in search of his freedom takes over from the sane Amir his life of an anguished person. "I don't want to forget anymore"(Hosseini 242), he says to Farid, tearing down the wall of time he had built on his way out of Afghanistan and deliberately taking the curse of his actions into his own hands thus inching one step deeper into the responsibility of his action.

When Amir faces off Assef in the closed room of the Taliban enclosure it is precisely to take over the central responsibility pertaining to his own life; a responsibility that he has avoided twenty three years ago. Somewhere in his consciousness Amir remembers what Baba had said and what Rahim Khan had later conformed "A boy who won't stand up for himself becomes a man who can't stand up to anything" (Hosseini 22). The one on one fight with Assef binds him not only to the universal human condition, a type of humanity which Sartre describes as "—a commitment always understandable to no matter whom in no matter what epoch—"(Kauffmann 363); but also to his responsibility towards his own self. Thus he laughs with each of Assef's blow because,

What was so funny was that, for the first time since the winter of 1975, I felt at peace. I laughed because I saw that, in some hidden nook in the corner of my mind, I'd even been looking forward to this. I remembered the day on the hill I had pelted Hassan with pomegranates and tried to provoke him. He'd just stood there, doing nothing, red juice soaking through his shirt like blood. Then he'd taken the pomegranate from my hand, crushed it against my forehead. *Are you satisfied now?* He'd hissed. *Do you feel better?* I hadn't been happy and I hadn't felt better, not at all. But I did now. My body was broken— just how much badly I wouldn't find out until later—but I felt *healed*. Healed at last. I laughed. (Hosseini 265-66)

Determinedly Amir's travel to Afghanistan becomes a greater mission than just to rescue Shorab, who becomes only a small part of a bigger redemption. Unlike that of the empirical psychology Amir's psychological conscious that begins with the upsurge of his freedom leads him to his totality. Taking responsibility in this story pertains less to the responsibility of Shorab's life and more to the multiple responsibilities of Amir's action and his life. The phone call that makes an important milestone in *The Kite Runner*, was a call for Amir from the responsibility of his own life. That Amir completes the trip without abandoning any of his duties proves his

diligence in accordance to both Buddha's and Sartre's teaching.

### Conclusion

Amir's story as the readers would know is a story of fiction and his single individualistic realisation does not reduce the problems of the individual and societal anguish that ironically crosses the boundaries of the book and presents itself in the real world. The premises that unite together that which is fictitious and the real world are not the wars but the Existential struggle of everyday life that continues to remain like an elephant in the room. In the present globalised society taking responsibility is important. Sartre's explanation of Existential psychoanalysis points out that to outgrow its anguish human beings should act in its own self and for its own self. It should take its own responsibility and make choices depending on the facticity of "human reality as an empirical choice of its own end" (Sartre 734). Individual realisation of all men and women would determine the 'original project' of the society. The ultimate projection of the novel in the term of existentialism is the survival of all individual; each free in their own identity, despite their difference in race or religion.

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