



Freedom and Responsibility: An Existential Analysis of Amir from The Kite Runner

Yongting Yang

Guangdong University of Science and Technology, China

Abstract: *The Kite Runner* tells a story of how Amir, who is tormented by the guilt of abandoning a best friend, achieves peace in his heart by taking the responsibility for his wrong decision. This paper analyzes Amir from the perspective of existentialism, dissecting the action and choice of Amir with the theme of freedom and responsibility.

Keywords: *The Kite Runner*; Existential; Freedom; Responsibility

Publication date: December, 2020

Publication online: 31 December, 2020

***Corresponding author:** Yongting Yang, faysakura@163.com

1 Introduction

Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, in the background of the relatively stable Afghanistan of the early 1970s, tells a gripping story centering around the boyhood friendship between Amir and Hassan. The story interlaces the depiction of family and friendship with the themes of betrayal and redemption. It is praised "extraordinary" by *People*, and named "Best Book of the Year" by *San Francisco Chronicle* and *Observer*. Amir, the privileged narrator of this novel, betrays his best friend Hassan and runs away from his responsibility when he is a boy. Yet the guilt remains deep in his heart and he can never get rid of it. Years later, he is told that there is "a way to be good again", so he takes the chance to remedy his wrong-doing, and finds his freedom and true-self in the end. This paper analyzes Amir's struggle deep in his heart from the perspective of existentialism, explaining his twisted friendship with his best friend Hassan, the origin of self-reproach, and the process

of redemption, in order to interpret the novel with the theme of freedom and responsibility.

2 Key concepts: freedom and responsibility

There are altogether five themes that can be summarize from what the existentials are fond of defining and appropriating. Freedom and responsibility is one of these themes which illustrates the complexity of human existence. This idea of existentialism is a philosophy of freedom that dominates Jean-Paul Sartre's doctrine, in which responsibility weighs as much as freedom. People enjoy the absolute freedom in an isolated world, but shackled by cultures and customs in a society. To realize personal freedom, one should recognize the link between choices they made and the actions chosen by them. In other words, people are supposed to live in restrictions of a society and be confined to social norms. Therefore, it is vital for them to realize that they are responsible for the results of their actions so that they need to choose wisely. Decisions against conscience will lead to guilt or self-torture. Sartre said that "man is condemned to be free", freedom is a blessing for human beings as well as a curse since it entails possibility as well as great responsibility (1975: 353). Flynn concludes it in his *Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction* that "its basis is the fact that we can stand back from our lives and reflect on what we have been doing... but we are as responsible as we are free" (2006: 8). Freedom and responsibility go side by side in people's life. Only through exercising the freedom of choice and acknowledging responsibility can one really achieve "authenticity" or "self-recovery" (Sartre, 1999: 70).

3 Amir's "bad faith"

Amir and Hassan are good friends in the story. However, he cowardly runs away when Hassan was in trouble and sets him up to expel him later. This is the origin of his guilt. Sartre believes that man has no given or predetermined essence (2005: 5). Human being exists first and then defines his nature by his own choice (Sartre, 2005: 6). He explains that "Human freedom precedes essence in man and makes it possible; the essence of the human being is suspended in his freedom" (1999: 25). To avoid the responsibility coming together with fundamental freedom, man tends to flee away from the freedom of choice, falling into what Sartre called "bad faith: a lie to oneself" (1999: 48). So "bad faith" is an attitude one adopts when he is unwilling to recognize the importance of his choice and refuse to take the responsibility for life.

3.1 Betrayal

Amir has absolute freedom to make decisions, and that defines what kind of person he is. "I open my mouth, almost said something. Almost. The rest of my life might have turned out differently if I had. But I didn't. I just watched. Paralyzed" (Hosseini, 2013: 80). He realizes the importance of this choice and how it has change his life when looking backwards, yet fail to make the right decision back then. "I had one last chance to make a decision. One final opportunity to decide who I was going to be... in the end, I ran. I ran because I was a coward" (ibid, 2013: 84). Out of selfish considerations, Amir chooses to ignore his best friend, abandon the boy he'd grown up with. He makes his decision, and he should take responsibility for it. Calling himself a coward, Amir has obviously been tortured by this scene for many years, definitely regretting what he has done to Hassan. "[A coward]... is like that because he has made himself into a coward by actions. There is no such thing as a cowardly temperament... what produces cowardice is the act of giving up or giving away... a coward is defined by the deed that he has done" (Sartre, 1975: 360). That choice of abandoning Hassan, the act of betraying a best friend, defined Amir as a coward.

3.2 Deeper in guilt

When Amir's heart is filled with the guilt of betraying Hassan, he could have chosen to confess and ask

for forgiveness. However, he chooses to set Hassan up to get rid of him (Hosseini, 2013: 113-115). He mistakenly assumes that he can be free of guilt if the reminder of guilt is not in sight, so he makes another selfish decision that causes Hassan's departure. Nevertheless, his little plot does not work out as he wishes. Without Hassan in sight, he still cannot break away from the compunction and self-reproach of cowardly abandoning a friend. The burden deep in his heart remains and the guilt is growing with time. The nature of a person is determined by the actions chosen by himself. This choice of setting Hassan up, the same as that of running away, escapes from responsibility as well as freedom. He has failed to recognize that only through the actions chosen by himself can he realize freedom. In this case, Amir has been bogged down in the mire of guilt.

3.3 Torment from conscience

All the things Amir has done are for one purpose: to relieve the burden of his heart. He wants to forget the shameful part of his life, but it doesn't work out as he wishes. On the contrary, it becomes his life-long guilt. Later in his life, no matter in Afghanistan or in America, he cannot escape the haunt of regret. The image of Hassan's blood-stained pants keeps looming before him. "...always, my mind returned to the ally. To Hassan's brown corduroy pants lying on the bricks" (ibid, 2013: 101). When he graduates from high school in America, Baba's mention about Hassan hits him like "a pair of steel hands closed around the windpipe" (ibid, 2013: 144). Amir's guilt and compunction are the price he pays for the several wrong choices he has made. The result of his "bad faith" has imprinted him over the years. The action defines him as a person in the society, even though it is not publicly known. The effect does not fade with the passing of time, instead, bloom with a trigger.

4 Redemption

Bad faith is not inevitable. To evade it requires "a self-recovery of being which was previously corrupted", and such a self-recovery is called "authenticity" (Sartre, 1999: 70). It requests a person to bravely confront the responsibility of freedom, therefore, he is to make "a fundamental choice of being – a way of being that neither fled the subject's freedom nor its past" (Miller, 1982:163).

4.1 A way to be good again

A call breaks the false peace covered Amir's mind for so many years in America. The guilt is still buried deep in his heart. Rahim Khan talked to Amir on the phone that "there is a way to be good again" (Hosseini, 2013: 207). He asked Amir to come back "home" and face the past. He made Amir realize that he was responsible for Hassan's tragedy by informing him all things about Hassan, including the secret that they are half brothers.

"I had driven Hassan and Ali out of the house. Was it too far-fetched to image that things might have turned out differently if I hadn't? Maybe Baba would have brought them along to America. Maybe Hassan would have had a home of his own now, a job, a family, a life in a country where no one cared that he was a Haraza...how could I pack up and go back home when my actions may have cost Hassan a chance at those very same things?" (ibid, 2013: 236)

"What had I done, other than take my guilt out on the very same person I had betrayed, and then try to forget it all? What had I done, other than become an insomniac..." (ibid, 2013: 313)

The truth makes Amir feel even worse, because he has been told the results of his actions that are too heavy to accept. He can sense the responsibility of making those decisions, especially when he heard that Hassan had been killed. The fact that Hassan suffered while Amir lived comfortably in the United States furthers Amir's shame and guilt, which also brings him back to Kabul. Then with the push and guidance of Rahim Khan, Amir stepped on the way to take his responsibility. The way to be good again is to rescue Hassan's son Sohrab, which means that he has to face Assef, his old enemy and a Taliban official by then. He was aware of the dangers, but with the realization of the "possibility for the coward to give up cowardice" (Sartre, 1975: 359), and since only through the remedial actions chosen by himself can he realize freedom, Amir determined to grab "the last chance to redemption" (Hosseini, 2013: 240). In this way, he has managed to excise his freedom of choice and realize his "self-recovery".

4.2 Freedom

When Amir was told that the only way to take Sohrab away was to win the one-on-one fight with Assef, he agreed, even though knowing there was no chance for him to win. He takes it as the punishment of betraying

Hassan. "I don't know at what point I started laughing, but I did. It hurt to laugh, hurt my jaws, my ribs, my throats...for the first time since the winter of 1975, I felt at peace...my body was broken...but I felt healed. Healed at last" (ibid, 2013: 312). His action of saving Sohrab from Assef frees himself from sin and suffering and leads him to freedom in finding forgiveness (Hayes, 2007: 83). That is the method to regain authenticity, the true-self, in the viewpoints of existentialism.

Saved by Sohrab's slingshot, Amir manages to escape Assef's evil hands with Sohrab, but Amir's task is not finished. The trauma of wars and sexual offense develop an instinctive mistrust of strangers in Sohrab, and the attempted suicide out of despair makes him fall into a complete self-isolation. To help Sohrab resuming a normal life, Amir makes great efforts. Finally, in the traditional Afghanistan New Year, Sohrab accepts Amir's suggestion of flying the kite. "...the glassy, vacant look in his eyes was gone...his eyes suddenly alert. Awake. Alive" (Hosseini, 2013: 399). At that moment, Amir finds his true self and freedom; and the life-long guilt has finally ended.

Human freedom is manifested in two aspects: choice and action. The choice of bandoning a friend loses Amir the freedom of a peaceful mind. The results and impact of his actions cannot be changed or removed, but it could be mended by facing the reality, and take responsibility to amend the wrong. His fighting to rescue Sohrab proves to be a redemption to free himself from the guilt of betraying Hassan. The boyhood friendship between Amir and Hassan has lost, so Sohrab represents his father, what with his astonishing similar sufferings and the fact of who he is. Thus, to complete his task of fulfilling the true-self, it is not enough by just saving Sohrab's life, he should guild Sohrab out of the shadow, away from the pain and the miserable way he used to live.

5 Conclusion

The Kite Runner is an extraordinary novel that interweaves the plot with friendship, betrayal, and redemption under a broad historical background of Afghanistan and the United States. It reveals the complexity and value of human existence by describing the fates of Amir and the people around him. This paper, from the perspective of existentialism, analyzes Amir's life-long guilt for

Hassan and his struggle for redemption with the theme of freedom and responsibility in existentialism. His guilt and regret originate from a series of selfish decisions he makes. One must take full responsibility for his own actions and the result of every choice; otherwise, he can never attain freedom and authenticity. Through the depicted life of Amir, it can be clearly assured that making choice is of great importance, and be responsible for the decision is another valuable instruction in life. For those who have made wrong decisions, taking responsibility will always be the priority to heal the distorted self inside. It is also the only way to achieve authenticity. The existentialsits believe that people can set foot on the path of life they have traveled and reflect on everything they do. In this sense, men are always surpassing themselves, which is the subtleties and essence of human existence.

References

- [1] Cooper, David E., *Existentialism: A Reconstruction*[M]. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 1999.
- [2] Flynn, Thomas R., *Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction*[M]. London: Oxford UP, 2006.
- [3] Hayes, Judi Slayden. *In Search of The Kite Runner*[M]. Saint Louis: Chalice Press, 2007.
- [4] Hosseini, Khaled, *The Kite Runner*[M]. New York: Penguin Group, 2013.
- [5] Miller, James. *History and Human Existence: From Marx to Merleau-Ponty*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.
- [6] Sartre, Jean-Paul. "Existentialism is a Humanism." Trans. Philip Mairet. *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*. Eds. Walter Kaufman[A]. New York: NAS, 1975.
- [7] *Being and Nothingness: an Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*[M]. Trans. Hazel E. Barnes. Beijing: China Social Science Publishing House, 1999.
- [8] Zhang, Hongmin. *Betrayal and Redemption: Race and Family Relations in The Kite Runner*[D]. Central China Normal University, 2011.
- [1] Cooper, David E., *Existentialism: A Reconstruction*[M].