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# The “Eternal Loop” of Guilt and the Attempt to Atone in McEwan’s Atonement and Hosseini’s The Kite Runner

## **Keywords**

The Kite Runner, Atonement, Ian McEwan, Khaled Hosseini

The “Eternal Loop” of Guilt and the Attempt to Atone  
in McEwan’s *Atonement* and Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner*

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The great tragedies carry in them an overwhelming sense of guilt: the unbearable guilt of incest in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* and the guilt of murder in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. The sense of guilt the protagonists felt owing to a crime committed at some point in their adulthood changes the course of their lives. It either brings about their downfall or they spend the rest of their lifetime trying to find redemption. What if a person suffers a sense of guilt from a crime committed in childhood? Is the effect on one’s life greater than if he/she had committed the same crime at a later point in

life? Will one be able to atone when the chain of events cannot be reversed and it is too late to fix the past? The novels *Atonement* by Ian McEwan and *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini study this childhood sense of guilt felt by the protagonists Briony and Amir, both of whom experience lifelong remorse and engage in lifelong attempts to atone for past crimes.

### **Characterizing Guilt:**

To fully understand the characters of Briony and Amir, we must examine their childhood selves, their states of mind at that point in their lives, the factors that consciously or unconsciously contributed to their crimes, and the thoughts for which they feel guilt later in their lives. Thirteen-year-old Briony Tallis stands in the decisive transition point between childhood and adolescence. Like most children her age, she desperately wants recognition from elders to find a place in the adult world. She imagines and fantasizes instances where her elder brother Leon would see her play performed and proudly exclaim to his friends, “Yes my younger sister, Briony Tallis the writer, you must surely have heard of her” (4). Her extreme seriousness in her literary pursuits is sometimes amusing to her parents. She uses her literary talent to win approval and recognition. In this domain, she does not tolerate interference. For example, she suspects a “destructive intent” (34) when Lola tries to take the lead while practicing for their play. She views Lola as someone trying to usurp her position as the important child in the

family and, more significantly, the center of attention as the creator of the play. Her desire for recognition is so great that she imagines winning a contest in flaying nettles.

In his book *Childhood and Society*, Erik Erikson says, “The superego of the child is primitive, cruel and uncompromising as may be observed in instances where children over-control and over-constrict themselves” (231). Briony is an example of such a child. We find her “uncompromising” in the extreme sense of order and discipline she imposes on herself and her surroundings: “In fact Briony’s was the only tidy upstairs room in the house. Her straight-backed dolls in their many-roomed mansion appeared to be under strict instructions not to touch the walls [...]” (5).

This sense of order dictates her budding moral notions. We find her adapted to certain standard ideas existing in the society: “A love of order also shaped the principles of justice, with death and marriage the main engines of housekeeping [...]” (7). At thirteen, she has a strong conviction that marriage was an example of “virtue rewarded” (9) and for her the as yet unthinkable notion of “sexual bliss” (9) was justified within it. Anything outside it, for example a divorce or a romantic relationship, existed in a “realm of disorder” (9). It is owing to the fact that she has not been introduced to the adult world of sexuality, that the scene before the fountain between Cecilia and Robbie disturbs her and fires her childish imagination. She is not able to envision anything outside her closed ideas of a prince seeking the hand of a princess. It goes beyond her level of

comprehension that Cecilia should strip in front of Robbie, and Briony's mind starts making moral deductions; when she finally encounters them making love in the library, she thinks it as an assault on Cecilia. It is not that she is unfamiliar with the notion of sexuality and its terminology. She sees the word *cunt* in Robbie's letter and has an idea to what it refers. She is disgusted by its obscenity and at the same time fascinated by its straightforward eroticism. She senses a certain barbarism in the word because of the general prohibition regarding its usage and is convinced that Robbie is nothing but a sex maniac who could assault anybody.

As is stressed time and again in the novel, Briony has an unusually active imagination, one that cannot distinguish clearly between the real and the fanciful. This kind of imagination is dangerous as Briony makes assumptions to suit her creative appetite. While watching the scene in front of the fountain, for example, she is thrilled with the prospect of recounting the scene on paper. Her experiences of that day reveal to her that the childhood world of fairytales has come to an end: "The very complexity of her feelings confirmed Briony in her view that she was entering an arena of adult emotion and dissembling from which her writing was bound to benefit" (113). As a writer constantly searches for experiences, Briony realizes she should put her first experience as being part of an adult world into creative use. Her views are clearly disconnected from the reality of the situation, but she believes them to be true with all conviction.

Her excitement at recent discoveries and her sense

of resentment for the failure to enact her play make her impulsive and self-destructive. She destroys the easel she prepared for her performance. In pure childhood curiosity and impulse, she tears open Robbie's letter and reads it when she is not supposed to. It is also her impulse that makes her go headlong with her preconceived notion that Robbie raped Lola. She accuses him, sticks to this claim throughout the interrogation, and is successful in putting Robbie in prison. It is an interesting question whether Briony is innately cruel or just ignorant. Years later, on the battlefield, Robbie is disturbed by the fact of how a child could steadfastly hold on to a false accusation: "But not every child sends a man to prison with a lie. Not every child is so purposeful and malign, so consistent over time, never wavering, never doubted" (229). Briony realizes later in life that she used Robbie as a sacrificial lamb to get the recognition she desperately craved. Accusing Robbie was the means by which she could come to the notice of the adult world since her words were listened to and she was able to secure a place for herself.

Like Briony, twelve-year-old Amir is in a transition between childhood and the coming of adolescence. His father is an important and rich man in the Kabul of the 70s, and the family lives in a beautiful mansion in one of the more exclusive districts of the city. Amir is well provided for, and being from a family of native Pashtuns, he has a certain class superiority. However, social and economic security is not what Amir needs. By nature sensitive, he suffers from deep emotional insecurity and he craves his

father's love. Having lost his mother while she gave birth to him, he carries a sense of guilt of being responsible for her death and believes that his father hated him for this reason: "Because the truth of it was, I always felt like Baba hated me a little. And why not? After all I had killed his beloved wife [...]" (17). His sense of insecurity stems from the fact that he is not the kind of son his father wants. He knows that in his youth his father had been a strong, athletic man, "a force of nature [...]" with hands that looked capable of uprooting a willow tree" (11). Amir is, however, neither sporty nor athletic. However hard his father tries to spark in him an interest towards sports, Amir fails. He fails in his attempt to play football. He fails in watching the popular Afghan sport Buzkashi: he cries seeing a severely injured player. He lets the other kids push and shove him. His father is not able to accept his sensitive nature and his inability to fight back, and he confides his disappointment to Rahim Khan: "A boy who won't stand up for himself becomes a man who can't stand up to anything" (20).

Amir's close friend is Hassan, their servant Ali's son. They grew up together like brothers. Though they are together most of the time, Amir is aware of their differences, most importantly in terms of class. He admits stepping into Hassan's hut only a few times. He is aware that they are his servants, that they are Hazaras. Though he loves Hassan, Amir is jealous of Hassan's natural physical prowess and the fact that he can stand up to the neighborhood boys on his behalf. Amir is never grateful for Hassan's help. For example, if his father asks how Hassan got scraped, Amir

lies that Hassan fell down. He is never ready to admit before his father that it is Hassan who defends him. He is extremely jealous of his father's regard for Hassan:

He asked me to fetch Hassan too, but I lied and told him Hassan had the runs. I wanted Baba all to myself. And besides, one time at Ghargha Lake, Hassan and I were skimming stones and Hassan made his stone skip eight times. The most I managed was five. Baba was there, watching and he patted Hassan on the back. Even put his arm around his shoulder. (12)

Though his father fails to notice it, Amir has a mean streak that he vents out on Ali and Hassan. In this case, his sense of social superiority informs his meanness. Like children who could be clannish and cruelly exclude or insult anyone from a different racial or cultural background, Amir constantly derides Ali and Hassan. For example, he makes fun of Ali's way of walking and regularly teases Hassan for being illiterate: "There was something fascinating—albeit in a rich way—about teasing Hassan. Kind of like when we used to play insect torture" (47). He knows Ali and Hassan would not defend themselves because they are not only simple hearted but, most importantly, also of an inferior status to him. He takes his cruelty out on them because there is no danger of retaliation.

Amir has a talent for literary pursuits. He makes this discovery in 1973, when, wanting to trick Hassan, he digresses from the original story that he had been telling in order to make fun of him. Contrary to his expectations,

however, Hassan loves what he hears and asserts that Amir's modifications improve the tale. Thus, Amir ends up writing his first story. Yet, when he tries to win Baba's favor by showing him the tale, his father is uninterested, and it is Rahim Khan and Hassan who encourage his literary pursuit. He is a star reciting poetic verses from memory in the game *Sherjangi* played at school. His father is unimpressed and feels that he has no use of a son who loves poems rather than hunting or football. Amir tries to win his love in the only other thing he is good at—kite-fighting. He makes up his mind to win the kite-fighting tournament that year, to run the kite and bring it home to show his father.

However, the thing that makes him commit a crime and for which he has to bear a lifelong sense of guilt is his inherent cowardice. It is Amir's cowardice that his father is concerned about when he confides in Rahim Khan that it is strength of will that is "missing" in Amir. He is unable to defend not only himself but also his friend, fearing he would get hurt instead. The day in 1975, after winning the kite-fighting tournament, when he sees Hassan being raped by Assef in the alley, he is scared not for Hassan but for himself. He cannot muster the courage to step into the alley and save Hassan because he fears they would hurt him. He knows that this final act of cowardice would determine his later life:

I had one last chance to make a decision. One final opportunity to decide who I was going to be. I could step into the alley, stand up for Hassan—the way he had stood up for me all

those times in the past— and accept whatever would happen to me. Or I could run. In the end I ran. I ran because I was a coward. (68)

Later, he is unable to face his guilt as this inability to defend Hassan makes him a liar and a thief. He takes out his guilt on Hassan, using him as an effigy, pelting him with pomegranates on the hill shouting, “You’re a coward” (81). He is unable to look at either Ali or Hassan without remembering his failure. Thus, he frames Hassan as a thief to make his father send them out of the house. He realizes later in life that on that day in the alley he used Hassan as a scapegoat to win his father’s affection.

Every society has the outsider or consciously constructs the outsider. This proverbial outsider becomes the scapegoat who is sacrificed as a means to gain the unity of the group. The theme of sacrifice is an offshoot of the Judeo-Christian tradition, whether it is Cain sacrificing his brother out of jealousy or the sacrifice of Christ in the New Testament. Both Briony and Amir are aware in their later lives that they used their victims as scapegoats. They sacrificed them as means to an end: Briony to secure a position in the adult world and Amir to gain his father’s love. They were able to use their victims as scapegoats, aware of the class and racial disparities.

### **Guilt as a Form of Self-Torture:**

In his book *Civilization and its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud notes: “To begin with, if we ask how a person comes

to have a sense of guilt, we arrive at an answer which cannot be disputed: a person feels guilty (devout people would say sinful) when he does something he knows to be ‘bad’” (71). We feel guilty because we have a conscience, a conscience dictated by a set of moral values set before us. In a child, this conscience or, as Freud says, superego, is in the developing stage when he/she is gradually internalizing certain controls upon him/herself. It is because of the inability to morally gauge their actions that both Briony and Amir’s reaction to their crimes is initially confused and extreme.

Deep inside, Briony feels a sense of unease, suspecting a difference between what she “thought” and what she actually saw that night:

As early as the week that followed, the glazed surface of conviction was not without its blemishes and hairline cracks. Whenever she was conscious of them, which was not often, she was driven back, with a little swooping sensation in her stomach, to the understanding that what she knew was not literally, or not only, based on the visible. (168)

Her guilt is slow in manifesting itself; it is initially overpowered by her acute determination to defend her accusation.

Amir’s reaction to his crime is aggressive. He knows he is guilty of being a coward in not trying to save Hassan. He is not able to look at Hassan without confronting his guilty conscience. He is also unable to accept Hassan’s patient surrender to his betrayal. Like Briony, he grapples

for a way to deal with his guilt, and it comes out in the form of unwarranted anger. The day he takes Hassan to the hill and pelts him with pomegranates, Amir cries in exasperation at Hassan's deep loyalty, which he knows he is clearly unworthy of and wishes "he'd give [him] the punishment [he] craved, so maybe [he]'d finally sleep at night"(81). He imagines himself in Hassan's position, identifies with Hassan's misery, and, out of a somewhat narrow sense of empathy, vents his anger towards him. It is an anger that he feels because of his heinous betrayal. Once he identifies himself as the victim of his own crime, he is no more at peace. As P.S. Greenspan points out in his book *Practical Guilt*, "the guilty agent is assumed to be emotionally at odds with himself as a result of the kind of identification with others" (142).

### **Crime as a "labyrinth of construction":**

R.G. Swinburne describes the four elements of atonement, which include reparation—doing what is necessary to repair the harm already done (82). It is to make things right again before it is too late or to achieve, in more informal terms, "damage control." Not many are provided with a chance to repent for the crime they committed. In many instances, the crime has already resulted in lasting damage. However, Briony and Amir are presented with an opportunity to repair their crimes, but they fail to take the right action a second time as well. Once Briony makes the initial accusation, things get out of hand and she is

embroiled in the confusing judicial process of inquiries and interrogation. She finds that her words “summon awful powers” (169). Yet, when she realizes the truth that it was Paul Marshall and not Robbie who raped Lola, Briony is unable to make the changes. She feels a certain obligation to stick to her statement and not “cancel the whole arrangement” (170) because she is pressed by the court and society to be consistent in her accusation. “She was not endowed with or old enough to possess such independence of spirit” (170). She finds herself “trapped” in “the labyrinth of her own construction” (170), and it is too late for her to retrace her steps, take back her statement, and redeem herself.

Amir is also presented with an opportunity to redress his crime when Hassan, out of his deep sense of loyalty for Amir and to save him again, owns up to the theft that he never committed. To cope with his sense of guilt, Amir had decided to frame Hassan as a thief so that Baba would get rid of Hassan and Ali. He expected at least some resistance from Hassan. Nevertheless, Hassan knew that if he told the truth, Baba would never forgive Amir. Amir is shocked and moved to shame by this gesture: “I wanted to tell them all that I was the snake in the grass, the monster in the lake. I wasn’t worthy of this sacrifice; I was a liar, a cheat and a thief. And I *would* have told, except that part of me was glad” (92). Amir does not take advantage of this second chance given to him as he feels he would rid himself of his guilt if he got rid of Hassan from his sight. He does not realize then that he would feel even guiltier later for letting go of this

opportunity to compensate for his wrong.

### **Crime upon Crime:**

Briony is not just guilty of accusing Robbie for rape, and Amir is not just guilty of running away without helping Hassan. They are responsible for other crimes committed simultaneously as a result of these acts. When they look back into their past, it is not a singular act that haunts them but all of the crimes they committed against the victims. Once Briony watches the scene before the fountain, she hastily forms an idea about Robbie being dangerous. This makes her open his letter and read it. She also shows the letter to Lola and confides all that she thinks. In an attempt to “save” her sister from this “sex-maniac,” she barges into Robbie and Cecilia in the library. After accusing Robbie of raping Lola, in her desperate attempt to gain attention, Briony brings the letter and hands it over to her mother and the police.

In the case of Amir, he not only stands by while Hassan is being raped but also runs away to save his own skin. He later feigns ignorance before Hassan and coolly takes the kite from Hassan to show it to his father. He snaps at Ali when the latter asks whether anything happened to Hassan on the day of the tournament. Amir feels he would be unable to bear his guilt as long as Hassan is present in the house. In his attempt to oust both Ali and Hassan from the house, he places his watch, his birthday present, and some money in Hassan’s bed to frame him as a thief. Though Baba forgives Hassan, Ali and Hassan leave the house.

### Encountering the Sexual Act as “Violence”:

In childhood, sex or sexuality is something that seems confined to the adult world, often discussed in hushed voices and usually thought of as something alien and therefore “bad.” The prepubescent Briony, for example, had some idea as to what the word *cunt* meant in Robbie’s letter, but “no one, not even her mother, had ever referred to the existence of that part of her to which—Briony was certain—the word referred” (114). The frankness of its usage in the letter disturbed her childhood sense of order and convinced her that Robbie was a sex maniac who could “attack anyone” (120). Once she witnesses the sex act in the library, her disturbed mind tells her that it is an assault on her sister and that she must save her family from this dangerous man.

Given the fact that both Briony and Amir first encounter the sex act in the form of rape, there is little wonder that they associate sex with violence and that their initial response is one of fear, disgust, and shame. The only sexual initiation that Amir experienced might very well take the shape of the lewd comments the Russian soldiers made to Hassan while they were on the road. As a twelve-year-old, he has no idea of what a sexual assault means. While Briony erroneously imagines what she witnesses is a rape, Amir bears witness to actual sexual assault. He feels guilty for doing nothing to protect Hassan and because he encountered something so shameful. Even looking at Hassan disturbs him, knowing that they both share the same shame as a result of that singular act of sexual violence, one as the victim and

the other as a passive onlooker: “I was grateful for the early-evening shadows that fell on Hassan’s face and concealed mine. I was glad that I didn’t have to return his gaze. Did he know I knew?” (69).

### **The Outsider as the Scapegoat:**

Either as a result of pervasive social constructs or parental influence, children are easily susceptible to the forces of prejudice. It is doubtful whether Briony would have stood against Paul Marshall, had she encountered him with Cecilia in the library, instead of Robbie. It is also doubtful whether Amir would have been so casual in his dismissal and accusation had Hassan been a fellow Pashtun and not a Hazara. The truth is that even as children, they are aware of class differences. As adults, this awareness of their narrow outlook in childhood shames them.

Briony had the audacity to make such a serious accusation against Robbie because she was aware of his social status. She had already absorbed the upper-class snobbery of the time and knew her statement would be privileged over Robbie’s, owing to his inferiority in class. Though Robbie had grown up with Cecilia and her siblings, Briony knew he was merely a “hobby” that her father liked to fund, a charitable act to serve the family’s upper-class egos, nothing more intimate than that. Cecilia leaves home and rejects any contact with her family as she is able to see through “the snobbery that lay behind their stupidity” (209) in believing Briony’s evidence.

In *The Kite Runner*, the matter of class is a significant factor. Amir belonged to a wealthy Pashtun family living in one of the wealthiest districts in Kabul while Ali and Hassan were Hazaras. As Amir comes to read in books, Hazaras were Mogul descendants and were considered ethnically inferior in Afghanistan where the natives were Pashtuns. The tension between both groups was exacerbated by the fact that Pashtuns were Sunni Muslims while the Hazaras were Shi'as. He also knew that Hazaras were more often referred to as "mice-eating, flat-nosed, load carrying donkeys" (8). He observed the fact that though his father and Ali had grown up together, his father never called Ali a "friend." He himself had a similar relation with Hassan. When both of them are threatened by Assef and his friends, Amir nearly tells Assef in defense, "But he's [Hassan] not my friend! He's my servant!"(36). He is aware that he is powerless before the forces of religion and ethnicity: "In the end, I was a Pashtun and he was a Hazara, I was Sunni and he was Shi'a, and nothing was ever going to change that. Nothing" (22). For this reason, it seems to him that Hassan is the one who should be making the sacrifices and not he. Perhaps the same thought runs through his mind while watching Hassan in the alley. What use would come of defending Hassan? "He was just a Hazara, wasn't he?"(68).

#### **A Subconscious Grudge:**

Briony and Amir might have had in them a subconscious grudge against their victims, which could have

affected their actions. For example, Robbie remembers an instance in the past around the time that Briony was ten: she jumped into the pool to see whether Robbie would save her and later confessed to Robbie that she loved him. He wonders whether this was the reason that she turned against him that day in 1935 because she had seen him favor her sister over her. An older Briony remembers the same incident but in a different light, saying she had forgotten all about her love three days after telling Robbie. However, her version could be challenged given the fact that the reader is given so many reasons to distrust Briony and her alternative versions of her story. It might be argued that the thwarted childhood love she harbored for Robbie subconsciously turned her against him when she saw the scene at the fountain and when she read the letter.

Amir had always been jealous when Baba favored Hassan. When he overhears his father telling Rahim Khan how Hassan always rescued Amir in street fights, he immediately turns caustic and antagonistic towards Hassan. To win the approval of his father, he decides to win the kite-fighting tournament. While witnessing the rape, he is unable to decide whether to step in and defend Hassan or to get the kite to take home to his father. The subconscious jealousy within him makes him frame Hassan as a thief so that Baba would hate Hassan and he, Amir, would be the only one loved by him.

The crimes that they commit end up breaking their homes. Robbie is imprisoned, and so he and Cecilia are separated. Unable to forgive Briony's crime or tolerate her

family's conduct, Cecilia leaves home and works in London, refusing to keep in touch with anyone. Amir destroys the only family that he and his father had in Kabul. His crime separates his father from Ali, both of whom grew up together. It also separates his father, as Amir later comes to know, from his second son, Hassan.

### **Fate and Time:**

War and national unrest play a significant role in the lives of Briony and Amir by making their crimes irreparable. Unprecedented sets of events that are clearly out of their control aggravate their sense of guilt. Four years after Briony sent Robbie to jail with her accusation, he is drafted as a soldier in the Second World War. She is already responsible for separating Cecilia and Robbie, but the matter gets out of her hands as she contemplates the fact that Robbie could be killed in the war: "[...]but now she understood how the war might compound her crime"(288). And it does. Robbie dies of septicemia while on the battlefield in France, and four months later Cecilia is killed in a blast. The war deepens her childhood sense of guilt, and she is helpless before it.

In 1981, six years after Amir witnesses Hassan's rape and later removes him out of his life, Afghanistan is invaded by the Russians and Amir and his father have to flee their homeland. The post-Russian rule of the Taliban worsens the situation. Under the Taliban regime, Hazaras are openly executed. In one such incident in 1998, when Hassan and his family are living alone in Amir's house in Kabul, the Taliban

officials execute Hassan and his wife, and Hassan's son is sent to an orphanage. When Amir comes to know of this from Rahim Khan and also the fact that Hassan had been his half-brother, he is unable to bear how fate has aggravated his sense of guilt.

### **An Attempt at Atonement:**

The word *atonement* obviously has religious connotations, meaning reparation or expiation for sin and reconciliation with oneself and with God. In the Old Testament, Moses is told that Aaron can make an atonement through sacrifice and offering: "For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul" (Leviticus 17:11). The word appears again in the New Testament: "we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement" (Romans 5:11). While examining the notion of why atonement is as necessary as guilt itself, Chaya Halberstam says, in connection with her analysis of Biblical stories, that "internal, moral guilt is viewed as an [end in itself], an almost self-catalyzing act that brings about its own judgment"(128). To atone, the person who has sinned must repent for his sins, must be willing to take responsibility for the consequences of his crime, and must take action to transform himself. "Those who believe, and do righteous deeds, we shall surely acquit them of their evil deeds, and shall recompense them the best of what they were

doing” (The Koran 29:7). Atonement can be achieved only if the person repents and the victim forgives (Swinburne 85).

In both novels, we can say that there is only an attempt to atone. The victims who need to forgive are not present. Cecilia dies long before Briony musters the courage to atone for her crime. Hassan is already executed before Amir returns to Kabul to repair his past. As Amir says, “My hands are stained with Hassan’s blood” (302). Both characters are indirectly responsible for the death of the victims. They cannot push back the clock; they can only try to make amends to ease a guilty conscience.

While the word *atonement* has strong religious connotations, neither Briony nor Amir is a follower of religion as such. In a way, they cannot even beg forgiveness from God. There is a general absence of religious belief in the Tallis family. There is a reference to the temple in their compound which is said to have been built “to enhance the pastoral ideal and had [...] no religious purpose at all” (72). The one time that Briony is said to have visited a church is when she goes to see Lola and Paul Marshall’s wedding. Though Amir claims to be a practicing Muslim, he remembers not having said his prayers for a long time. Could he really overcome his guilt and atone for it while being so detached from his faith? Only when Sohrab attempts suicide does Amir recite his prayers after fifteen years sitting in the hospital corridors:

“I throw my makeshift *jai-namaz*, my prayer rug, on the floor and I get on my knees, lower my forehead to the ground, my tears soaking

through the sheet. I bow to the west. Then I remember I haven't prayed for over fifteen years. I have long forgotten the words." (301)

When, as a teenager, Briony begins to understand the gravity of her crime and feels the pangs of guilt, she decides to leave home and instead of going to a college, enlists as a nurse in the hospital. Cecilia writes to Robbie, "I get the impression that she's taken on nursing as a sort of penance" (212). It is a "penance" for a girl used to comfort, attention, and praise. Not only does she go through the humiliating discomfort of cleaning bedpans everyday but also being reprimanded by the ward sister if she does not perform her duties properly: "She was abandoning herself to a life of strictures, rules, obedience, housework and a constant fear of disapproval" (276). This helps Briony forget temporarily her sense of guilt. Helping and taking care of the injured soldiers is an indirect way to implore Robbie for forgiveness.

Briony also attempts to atone for her crime by writing. She had decided back in 1935 to write the scene at the fountain from three different points of view. Her final novel, one that she is able to write after fifty-nine years of continuous rewriting, has Cecilia and Robbie together, alive and happy. She does this as she no longer had "the courage of (her) pessimism" to face the facts and tell the "pitiless" truth of their death. She is aware that she cannot achieve her atonement because, as a writer having "absolute powers of deciding outcomes, she is also God" (371). Just as guilt makes Lady Macbeth wash her hands again and again to get rid of the blood she imagines, for Briony, the "attempt" of

writing this novel again and again is a form of atonement: only while nearing the end of her life, when she has started to lose her memory, is she finally able to reconcile the two lovers in a fictional world. Even on her seventy-seventh birthday, she still has the guilt of what she had done as a thirteen year old, and she says she was not so “self serving as to let the lovers forgive [her]” (372); her writing was just “a final act of kindness, a stand against oblivion and despair” (372).

At the beginning of *The Kite Runner*, when Amir receives a call from Rahim Khan asking him to come to Pakistan, Amir knows it is his “past of un-atoned sins” (1) that is calling him again to give him a second chance, “a way to be good again”(2). Once in Pakistan, he comes to know from Rahim Khan that his childhood friend and the victim of his crime, Hassan, is dead, executed by the Taliban and that Hassan’s son, Sohrab, is in an orphanage in war-torn Kabul. Rahim Khan wants Amir to go to Kabul and bring Sohrab home. What shatters him is Rahim Khan’s revelation that Hassan had been Amir’s half-brother. He realizes “that Rahim Khan had summoned [him] here to atone not just for [his] sins but for Baba’s too” (198). Ultimately, his attempt to atone is his journey back to Kabul to rescue Sohrab from the hands of the abusing Talib official, Assef. He knows he would not be able to leave Sohrab alone after knowing the fact that he is his half-brother Hassan’s son. He decides to take Sohrab to America. Amir himself has no children with his wife, a fact he considers a punishment for what he had done in his childhood. He decides to raise Sohrab as his

child. Perhaps that would be the way to ask forgiveness from Hassan and atone for his crime. Sohrab's bubble of quietness after his suicide attempt is Amir's penance. Amir must make the patient effort to break this bubble and love Sohrab in an attempt to overcome his childhood sense of guilt.

Thus, we see how the passage of time, fate, and memory have a hand in making a childhood sense of guilt greater and deeper while ironically the characters have no choice but to consciously deal with it. Jacques Derrida writes that "forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable" (32). The reason why Briony and Amir are not able to get over their childhood sense of guilt is not just because of that singular act. The guilt is stronger and more prolonged because of various reasons. As adults, they have come to study the individuals they were in the past—their childhood selves—and are not able to identify with their grave faults and accommodate their heinous actions.

Their crimes had far reaching consequences, provoked by them but aided by fate and the time they lived in. Their guilt was also a form of narcissistic self-pity. Briony nurtures this form of self-pity through her writing, reminding herself again and again of her crime. Amir chooses to stay away from war-torn Kabul to play safe, even if guilt haunts him at every moment. Finally, their guilt is greater because they can be successful only in attaining partial atonement. Complete redemption will always elude them.

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