

**A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE ENCLOSED WORLD IN
FRANZ KAFKA’S THE TRIAL AND CHINGIZ AYTMATOV’S THE
SCAFFOLD**

Author: **Bahodirova Durdona**

Namangan State Institute of Foreign

Languages,

Master degree student

Email: durdonabahodirova510@gmail.com

Abstract

This comparative study explores the conceptualization of the "enclosed world" in Franz Kafka's "The Trial" and Chingiz Aytmatov's "The Scaffold", focusing on thematic structure, genre, characterization, and literary devices and how the two authors construct psychological, social, and philosophical confinement. Although the texts emerge from distinct cultural, linguistic, and historical contexts, they both articulate the individual's confrontation with systems of oppression-be it bureaucratic, existential, moral, or ideological. Through close textual analysis and contextual comparison, the research evaluates key themes such as guilt, justice, alienation, spiritual collapse, and the human quest for meaning. While Kafka foregrounds existential absurdity and the irrational mechanisms of power, Aytmatov emphasizes moral degeneration and spiritual responsibility within a collapsing socio-ethical landscape. The study concludes that both authors depict a claustrophobic universe where human dignity is tested, yet they diverge in their philosophical orientation: Kafka portrays the futility of resistance within an incomprehensible system, whereas Aytmatov reveals the possibility of spiritual transcendence despite societal decay.

Keywords: comparative literature, characterization, literary devices, bureaucratic, justice, truth, absurdism, humanism

Introduction

Franz Kafka's *The Trial* (1925) and Chingiz Aytmatov's *The Scaffold* (Plakha) (1986) are among the most significant literary works that explore the intricate relationship between the individual and overarching systems of power. Both novels interrogate the ways in which external structures-bureaucratic, political, or moral-enclose the individual not only physically but psychologically and spiritually. The protagonists of the works, Josef K. and Avdii Kalistratov, navigate hostile worlds where justice, truth, and morality appear fragmented, elusive, or entirely absent. Kafka's novel emerges from early twentieth-century Europe, shaped by the anxieties of modernism, the rise of impersonal institutions, and the existential crisis of the individual. *The Trial* presents an opaque judicial world in which Josef K. is accused without explanation and ultimately destroyed by an incomprehensible system. The sense of enclosure here operates on multiple levels: alienation, guilt, the labyrinthine court, and the protagonist's internal psychological fragmentation.

A gripping work of psychological horror, in its depiction of bureaucracy run amok Franz Kafka's *The Trial* skirts the line between fantasy and reality. This Penguin Classics edition is translated from the German with an introduction by Idris Parry. 'Somebody must have laid false information against Josef K., for he was arrested one morning without having done anything wrong.' From this first sentence onwards, Josef K. is on trial for his right to exist. (*The Trial* (Penguin Modern Classics) Paperback – International Edition, July 4, 2000 Franz Kafka (Author), Idris Parry (Translator))

Aytmatov's *The Scaffold*, written in the late Soviet period, reflects a very different yet equally oppressive reality-one defined by moral collapse, corruption, environmental devastation, and the erosion of human values. Avdii Kalistratov, a former seminarian turned journalist, represents the moral

conscience of society, whose spiritual mission places him in direct conflict with criminal networks and systemic injustice. Aytmatov's conception of the enclosed world is broader and more multilayered: it encompasses the spiritual enclosure of humanity, the ecological suffering symbolized by the wolves Akbara, and the socio-political constraints of a decaying ideological system. We conclude that *The Scaffold* is a literary warning about the coming end of times, which is being drawn closer by the evils of modern humans. Only the tragic and heroic feats of people like Avdii can possibly slow this process down. At the same time the Christian doctrine is not the only correct one: the second half of the novel is based on pantheistic views, demonstrating the syncretism of the author's worldview. (Shevchugova E.I. Christian Motives in Ch. T. Aytmatov's Novel *The Scaffold*. Vestnik NSU. Series: History and Philology. 2019;18(9):194-201. (In Russ.) <https://doi.org/10.25205/1818-7919-2019-18-9-194-201>)

Despite the temporal and geographic distance between the two novels, both texts illuminate how oppressive systems manufacture restricted or "enclosed" realities. The protagonists' struggles reveal the psychological and philosophical consequences of such confinement, highlighting human vulnerability, resilience, and the search for ethical truth. This study aims to examine these convergences and divergences through a systematic comparative framework.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative comparative literary methodology grounded in close reading, contextual analysis, and thematic synthesis. The study relies on authoritative translations of both novels and incorporates secondary scholarship from modernist, existentialist, and post-Soviet literary theory. The aim is to identify both convergences and divergences between the two literary works.

Close reading serves as the foundational method for analyzing narrative construction, linguistic patterns, symbolic structures, and the internal logic of each text. Through detailed engagement with the novels' descriptive passages, dialogues, and narrative tensions, this method enables the identification of recurring motifs-such as guilt, power, moral responsibility, and existential anxiety-and reveals the authorial strategies that shape each work's central conflicts and philosophical underpinnings.

Thematic analysis is used to trace major conceptual threads across both novels, including the critique of oppressive systems, the individual's confrontation with institutional violence, and the moral dilemmas embedded in modern and late-Soviet societies. This approach allows for a systematic comparison of how Kafka and Aytmatov construct themes of dehumanization, justice, spiritual crisis, and the search for meaning.

Character mapping is employed to examine the psychological depth, narrative function, and symbolic significance of key figures such as Josef K. and Avdiy Kallistratov. By comparing their trajectories, moral choices, and interactions with institutional power, this method highlights parallels in their existential struggles as well as the culturally specific dimensions of their characterization. Comparative characterization further illuminates how each author uses protagonists and secondary characters to embody broader ideological critiques.

A contextual-cultural framework situates both novels within their respective historical, political, and cultural environments: early 20th-century Central European modernism for Kafka, and late-Soviet moral-philosophical discourse for Aytmatov. This perspective clarifies how differing socio-political realities shape narrative form, ethical concerns, and representations of authority, while also revealing cross-cultural resonances in their treatment of human vulnerability and systemic injustice.

Symbolic analysis focuses on the interpretive significance of key images and motifs-such as the court, the execution apparatus, the steppe, the wolf cubs, and religious iconography. By examining how these symbols operate within each narrative's internal logic, the study uncovers deeper layers of meaning related to existential fear, spiritual decay, moral awakening, and the critique of bureaucratic or ideological violence.

This comparative analysis examines the narrative structures, thematic concerns, character constructions, and symbolic systems of Franz Kafka's *The Trial* and Chingiz Aytmatov's *The Place of the Skull*. Although the two novels emerge from distinct cultural, historical, and ideological contexts, they converge in their exploration of human vulnerability under oppressive systems, the erosion of moral agency, and the existential consequences of institutional power. Through close reading, thematic comparison, and contextual-cultural interpretation, this section highlights both the shared philosophical foundations and the divergent narrative strategies that define each work.

Kafka constructs a claustrophobic, labyrinthine narrative in which Josef K. becomes trapped within an incomprehensible judicial system. The fragmented, circular structure mirrors the irrationality and arbitrariness of bureaucratic authority. In contrast, Aytmatov employs a more expansive, multi-layered narrative that interweaves Avdiy Kallistratov's personal moral quest with broader socio-political realities of the late Soviet period. While Kafka's narrative emphasizes existential absurdity, Aytmatov situates systemic violence within a concrete ideological framework, exposing the moral decay produced by authoritarian structures. Both narratives, however, reveal how institutional power destabilizes individual identity and undermines the possibility of justice.

A central thematic convergence lies in the portrayal of guilt and responsibility. Josef K.'s guilt is existential and metaphysical-he is declared guilty without explanation, reflecting the modernist crisis of meaning. Avdiy's

guilt, by contrast, is ethical and socially grounded: he feels responsible for confronting injustice, corruption, and spiritual decline. Kafka's protagonist embodies passive resistance and gradual disintegration, whereas Aytmatov's hero represents active moral engagement, even at the cost of his life. This contrast underscores differing cultural conceptions of agency: Kafka's world denies the possibility of meaningful action, while Aytmatov's narrative insists on the moral imperative to act despite systemic constraints.

Both Josef K. and Avdiy function as symbolic figures whose personal trajectories illuminate broader ideological critiques. Josef K. is portrayed as an everyman figure whose identity dissolves under the weight of an opaque legal system. His psychological fragmentation reflects the alienation characteristic of early 20th-century European modernism. Avdiy, however, is constructed as a moral visionary whose spiritual convictions place him in direct conflict with the corrupt forces of his society. Secondary characters in both novels—court officials, bureaucrats, law enforcers, and ordinary citizens—serve to reinforce the protagonists' isolation and highlight the pervasive reach of institutional power. Yet Aytmatov's characters often retain a degree of moral complexity and cultural specificity absent from Kafka's deliberately abstract figures.

The cultural contexts of the two novels shape their narrative logic and thematic emphases. Kafka's work emerges from the anxieties of early modernity, marked by bureaucratic expansion, legal ambiguity, and the fragmentation of traditional moral frameworks. Aytmatov's novel, rooted in the late Soviet era, reflects the ideological contradictions of a society grappling with spiritual emptiness, ecological destruction, and the erosion of ethical values.

Results and Discussion

The comparative analysis of Franz Kafka's *The Trial* and Chingiz Aytmatov's *The Place of the Skull* demonstrates that, although the two novels arise from different cultural and ideological environments, they nevertheless

converge in their exploration of the individual's struggle against oppressive systems. Overall, the results indicate that both authors expose the destructive nature of institutional power, yet they do so through contrasting narrative strategies and philosophical orientations.

Kafka constructs an abstract, labyrinthine judicial system that operates without transparency or rationality. As a result, Josef K. becomes trapped in a world where guilt is predetermined and justice is inaccessible. Moreover, the ambiguity of the court reinforces the existential uncertainty central to Kafka's modernist worldview. By contrast, Aytmatov presents a concrete and historically grounded system shaped by late-Soviet ideological decay. Whereas Kafka's institutions symbolize universal human anxiety, Aytmatov's oppressive structures-corrupt officials, ideological dogma, and social indifference-are culturally specific and politically recognizable. Thus, the two novels differ significantly in how they conceptualize the origins and mechanisms of systemic violence.

The findings reveal that Kafka and Aytmatov diverge sharply in their treatment of human agency. Josef K. embodies passive resistance; despite his attempts to assert control, he remains powerless within an irrational system. Consequently, his fate illustrates the collapse of individual autonomy in the face of bureaucratic absurdity. On the other hand, Avdiy Kallistratov represents active moral engagement. He challenges injustice, defends the vulnerable, and seeks spiritual truth. In this way, Aytmatov frames moral responsibility as essential, even when resistance leads to suffering. Therefore, while Kafka emphasizes existential paralysis, Aytmatov highlights ethical courage.

Moreover, symbolism plays a central role in both novels; however, its function differs considerably. Kafka's symbols-the court, the inaccessible law, the execution-operate within an allegorical framework that underscores existential dread. Likewise, the fragmented spaces and faceless officials reinforce the theme of alienation. By comparison, Aytmatov's symbols are

culturally embedded and ethically charged. The steppe, the wolf cubs, and the crucifixion imagery reflect the spiritual crisis of Soviet society. Furthermore, these symbols expose the moral consequences of ideological violence. Thus, while Kafka's symbolism is metaphysical and universal, Aytmatov's is social, historical, and moral.

Both protagonists meet tragic ends; nevertheless, the meaning of their deaths diverges. Josef K.'s execution is senseless, reflecting a world devoid of moral coherence. It is said that he is killed "like a dog." In contrast, Avdiy's death carries ethical significance: it exposes the cruelty and spiritual emptiness of the society that destroys him. Consequently, Aytmatov's tragedy invites moral reflection, whereas Kafka's tragedy emphasizes existential absurdity.

Despite their differences, the results confirm that both novels address universal human concerns—justice, dignity, and the fragility of moral integrity. In the same way, each author critiques the dehumanizing effects of institutional power. However, Kafka universalizes these anxieties through abstraction, while Aytmatov situates them within the specific moral and political crises of the late Soviet era. Ultimately, the cultural context shapes not only the narrative form but also the philosophical message of each work.

As a result, we can conclude that the findings show that "The Trial" and "The Place of the Skull" converge in their critique of oppressive systems yet diverge in their narrative logic and philosophical orientation. Kafka presents a world where meaning is inaccessible and resistance is futile, whereas Aytmatov offers a moral vision in which ethical responsibility remains essential despite systemic violence. Thus, both novels illuminate the complex relationship between the individual and institutional power, demonstrating how cultural context influences the expression of universal human struggles.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the comparative analysis of *The Trial* and *The Place of the Skull* reveals that both Kafka and Aytmatov, despite their differing cultural and historical contexts, engage deeply with the theme of individual struggle against oppressive systems. While Kafka's narrative emphasizes existential uncertainty and the absurdity of bureaucratic power, Aytmatov, by contrast, presents a morally charged critique of ideological decay and spiritual emptiness in Soviet society. Moreover, both authors use symbolic structures to reinforce their philosophical concerns-Kafka through abstract metaphors of law and guilt, and Aytmatov through culturally grounded images of sacrifice, nature, and moral resistance. Thus, symbolism in both texts serves not only as a literary device but also as a lens through which the reader can interpret the deeper ethical implications of each narrative. Furthermore, the protagonists' trajectories-Josef K.'s passive descent into meaningless punishment and Avdiy's active pursuit of justice despite fatal consequences-illustrate two opposing visions of human agency. Whereas Kafka portrays the futility of resistance in a world devoid of logic, Aytmatov affirms the necessity of moral action, even when it leads to suffering. Ultimately, both novels converge in their portrayal of the individual's vulnerability within dehumanizing systems, yet diverge in their philosophical conclusions. Kafka's work leaves the reader with a sense of existential despair, while Aytmatov's narrative, though tragic, encourages ethical reflection and spiritual awakening. Therefore, this comparative study underscores how literature from different traditions can illuminate shared human concerns-justice, dignity, and the enduring question of how to live meaningfully in the face of systemic oppression.

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