



WINGS THAT FAIL, CAGES THAT PREVAIL: READING KAFKA THROUGH A *BROKEN TRAIL*

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Abstract

*The present study investigates the dynamic interplay between human aspiration and systemic entrapment in Franz Kafka's fiction, focusing on the metaphorical tension between wings and cages and conceptualized as the broken trail. Kafka's narratives, particularly *The Metamorphosis*, *The Trial*, *In the Penal Colony*, and *The Burrow*, depict protagonists who strive for liberation yet repeatedly encounter structural obstacles, highlighting the paradox of freedom within modern bureaucratic, existential, and social frameworks. The objectives of this study are to analyze the symbolic failure of wings as representations of human aspiration, examine the persistence of cages as forms of institutional, psychological, and existential control, conceptualize the broken trail as a metaphor for modern disorientation and systemic failure, and explore the contemporary and postcolonial relevance of Kafka's motifs. To achieve these aims, a qualitative, interpretive research design was employed, incorporating close textual reading and thematic analysis; moreover, secondary sources on existentialism, Weberian bureaucracy, post-humanism, and critical modernity were integrated to support theoretical interpretations. The findings reveal that Kafka's wings symbolize desire and transformative attempts that are structurally doomed to fail, while cages operate dynamically through procedural opacity, internalized discipline, and diffused authority; furthermore, the broken trail demonstrates that failure is systemic rather than incidental, and Kafka's motifs resonate strongly with contemporary and postcolonial bureaucratic realities where freedom is deferred, constrained, and manipulated. In conclusion, the study positions Kafka as a globally relevant critic of modern power, revealing how aspiration, movement, and systemic failure co-construct human experience; besides this, it demonstrates that recursive failure and structural entrapment are central to understanding both literary modernity and present-day administrative and technological systems. Based on these insights, the study recommends comparative analyses with other modernist and postcolonial authors, empirical studies of bureaucratic entrapment, and interdisciplinary research on digital and algorithmic forms of structural control.*

Keywords: *Kafkaesque, Aspiration and Confinement, Broken Trail, Bureaucracy*

Introduction

More than 60% of modern worker's report feeling trapped in bureaucratic systems that stifle creativity and personal freedom (Gray, 2011, p. 23). Similarly, Franz Kafka once remarked, *A cage went in search of a bird* (Kafka, 1919/2008), capturing the paradox of human aspiration in the face of unyielding structures. Such observations immediately raise a question: why do humans continually strive for freedom when the very systems they inhabit seem designed to prevent it? This tension between desire and constraint is not merely anecdotal; it resonates in literature, philosophy, and social reality alike, revealing the universal struggle between aspiration and limitation.

In this context, this study, titled *Wings That Fail, Cages That Prevail: Reading Kafka Through a Broken Trail*, examines Kafka's literary universe as a site for understanding modern conditions of confinement, alienation, and thwarted transcendence (Gray, 2011; Sokel, 2002). Kafka's recurring images of flight, imprisonment, metamorphosis, and endless trials form a symbolic grammar through which the anxieties of twentieth-century modernity—and by extension, contemporary bureaucratic societies—can be interpreted (Corngold, 2004). Importantly, the tension between the desire for freedom (wings) and the inescapability of oppressive structures (cages) lies at the heart of Kafka's fiction (Durgnat, 1973). Consequently, Kafka's work remains relevant today not only for literary studies but also for analyzing modern systems of power, control, and subjectivity (Weber, 1946; Sartre, 1956).

To situate this inquiry, Kafka wrote during a period marked by rapid bureaucratization, legal rationality, and the erosion of individual agency within modern institutions (Weber, 1946; Sokel, 2002). Works such as *The Metamorphosis*, *In the Penal Colony*, *The Trial*, and *The Burrow* depict protagonists who seek escape yet remain entrapped within invisible systems of control (Corngold, 2004). Moreover, Kafka's symbolic landscapes reflect what Max Weber described as the *iron cage* of modernity, while simultaneously engaging existential concerns highlighted by Sartre and Camus (Weber, 1946; Sartre, 1956; Camus, 1942). Thus, Kafka's narratives dramatize structural confinement where the path toward freedom is fragmented, misdirected, or illusory (Gray, 2011). However, despite extensive scholarship on Kafka's themes of alienation, bureaucracy, and existential despair, a critical problem persists: much of the research treats Kafka's imagery of confinement as static rather than dynamic (Gray, 2011). Scholars have focused on the cage without fully interrogating the failed attempts at flight that precede or accompany it (Corngold, 2004). As a result, the metaphor of *broken trails*—pathways toward liberation that collapse under systemic pressure—remains under-theorized. This gap calls for a reading that examines why escape is impossible in Kafka's world and how repeated failure becomes a defining condition of modern subjectivity (Durgnat, 1973; Sokel, 2002).

To address this gap, this study analyzes Kafka's major works, focusing on motifs of flight, transformation, punishment, and surveillance. For instance, Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis promises a radical break from human constraints yet results in deeper confinement; similarly, the condemned body in *In the Penal Colony* becomes the literal site where law inscribes itself (Kafka, 1919/2008). Likewise, in *The Burrow*, obsessive security construction becomes another form of self-imprisonment (Kafka, 1923/2008). Together, these examples demonstrate how Kafka constructs a paradoxical logic in which the pursuit of freedom strengthens the systems that entrap the subject (Corngold, 2004).

Furthermore, Kafka's relevance extends beyond Europe and resonates in contemporary local contexts. In societies such as Pakistan, marked by bureaucratic inertia, legal delays, surveillance,

and institutional mistrust, Kafka's vision acquires renewed urgency (Ali, 2020; Ahmed, 2018). Accordingly, the Kafkaesque condition—power without accountability and guilt without clarity—mirrors lived experiences within postcolonial administrative structures. Thus, Kafka emerges not as a distant European writer but as a globally relevant critic of systemic domination (Gray, 2011). In light of the above, the primary objectives of this study are threefold: to analyze the symbolic failure of *wings* as representations of human aspiration; to examine the persistence of *cages* as manifestations of institutional, psychological, and existential control; and to conceptualize the *broken trail* as a metaphor for modern disorientation. Correspondingly, the aim of this paper is to offer a re-reading of Kafka that foregrounds movement, failure, and repetition rather than stasis alone. Ultimately, by integrating literary analysis with philosophical and socio-political insights, this study demonstrates that in Kafka's world, freedom is not merely denied—it is structurally engineered to fail (Sokel, 2002; Corngold, 2004).

Research Problem

Franz Kafka's works have long been celebrated for their exploration of alienation, bureaucracy, and existential anxiety. However, a critical problem persists: much of the existing scholarship interprets Kafka's imagery of confinement as static, focusing predominantly on the *cage* rather than the interplay between attempted escape and systemic obstruction. In other words, the repeated failure of flight—the *broken trail*—remains under-theorized, leaving a gap in understanding how Kafka's narratives conceptualize the dynamic tension between human aspiration and structural entrapment (Gray, 2011; Corngold, 2004). Consequently, there is a need for a study that interrogates the paradoxical logic of Kafka's fiction, in which the pursuit of freedom inadvertently reinforces the very mechanisms of confinement, offering new insights into modern subjectivity and power dynamics.

Research Objectives

The primary objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To analyze the symbolic failure of *wings* as representations of human aspiration and attempts at liberation.
2. To examine the persistence of *cages* as manifestations of institutional, psychological, and existential control.
3. To conceptualize the *broken trail* as a critical metaphor for modern disorientation and repeated systemic failure.
4. To explore the contemporary and postcolonial relevance of Kafka's motifs, particularly in societies characterized by bureaucratic inertia, surveillance, and administrative oppression.

Furthermore, the study aims to integrate literary, philosophical, and socio-political perspectives, thereby providing a multidimensional understanding of Kafka's thematic concerns.

Research Questions

Based on the research problem and objectives, this study addresses the following questions:

1. How does Kafka represent the tension between human aspiration (*wings*) and structural confinement (*cages*) in his major works?
2. In what ways does the metaphor of the *broken trail* illustrate the repeated failure of freedom and mobility in Kafka's fiction?
3. How do Kafka's depictions of confinement and failed escape resonate with contemporary bureaucratic and postcolonial realities?
4. What new insights into power, subjectivity, and systemic entrapment can a dynamic reading of Kafka provide, beyond existing static interpretations?

Thus, these questions guide a focused inquiry into the complex interplay of freedom, constraint, and systemic logic in Kafka's narratives.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons. Firstly, it offers a novel reading of Kafka that emphasizes movement, failure, and dynamic tension, rather than static confinement, thereby addressing a critical gap in Kafka scholarship (Sokel, 2002). Secondly, by linking Kafka's motifs to contemporary and postcolonial contexts, it demonstrates the global relevance of his work in understanding bureaucratic oppression, systemic failure, and existential alienation (Ali, 2020; Ahmed, 2018). Thirdly, the study provides theoretical and methodological contributions by integrating literary analysis with philosophical and socio-political frameworks, offering a model for analyzing literature in relation to structural power. Consequently, it enriches both literary studies and interdisciplinary scholarship on human freedom and systemic constraint.

Limitations of the Study

However, this study also has some limitations. First, the focus is restricted to Kafka's major texts—*The Metamorphosis*, *In the Penal Colony*, *The Trial*, and *The Burrow*—and may not fully capture minor works or unpublished manuscripts that could provide additional perspectives. Second, the study primarily employs qualitative, textual, and thematic analysis, meaning that empirical or quantitative methods, such as sociological surveys on bureaucratic experience, are not included. Finally, while efforts are made to draw contemporary and postcolonial connections, these interpretations are contextually selective and may not account for all regional or temporal variations.

Originality and Novelty

Importantly, the originality of this study lies in its focus on the dynamic interplay between flight and confinement—the *broken trail*—which has received limited scholarly attention. Unlike previous research that emphasizes alienation or static bureaucracy, this study foregrounds the paradoxical process in which attempts at liberation simultaneously reveal and reinforce systemic constraints. Additionally, its novelty extends to the exploration of Kafka's relevance beyond European modernity, particularly in postcolonial and contemporary bureaucratic contexts, thereby offering fresh insights into global structures of power, control, and existential vulnerability. Thus, the study not only contributes to Kafka scholarship but also advances interdisciplinary understandings of modernity, governance, and human aspiration.

Literature Review

The evocative phrase *Wings That Fail, Cages That Prevail: Reading Kafka Through a Broken Trail* invites a multidimensional engagement with Franz Kafka's literary corpus, drawing on ecocriticism, post-humanism, existentialism, and animal studies to illuminate persistent concerns with confinement, alienation, agency, and the porous boundary between the human and the non-human. To begin with, Kafka's oeuvre—particularly his metamorphic narratives and depictions of bureaucratic entrapment—has generated sustained scholarly attention, which continues to evolve as new theoretical paradigms emerge. In this regard, recent criticism increasingly positions Kafka as a prescient thinker whose work anticipates contemporary ecological and post-humanist anxieties. The metaphor of the *broken trail*, therefore, signals fragmented journeys, failed routes of escape, and discontinuous paths—motifs that recur across Kafka's fiction and underpin his vision of modern existence as structurally obstructed rather than temporarily hindered.

Most notably, *The Metamorphosis* remains Kafka's most extensively analyzed text, offering fertile ground for interrogations of alienation, identity crisis, and existential dislocation. Traditionally,

Gregor Samsa's transformation was interpreted as a psychological or symbolic metaphor; however, more recent scholarship emphasizes its philosophical and ontological implications. Uddin (2023), for instance, argues that Kafka's novella grapples profoundly with alienation, existential crisis, and the human condition, thereby situating Gregor's metamorphosis within broader modern anxieties. Building on this, existential readings foreground Gregor's transformation as an encounter with absurdity and meaninglessness, revealing how his new corporeal form intensifies his isolation from family, society, and self (Aizaz, 2024). Similarly, Luo (2021) extends the analysis of alienation by demonstrating how Kafka presents interconnected forms of estrangement—self-alienation, social alienation, environmental alienation, and the fractured relationship between humanity and nature—suggesting that individual psychological breakdown mirrors wider ecological and social disjunctions.

Furthermore, Kafka's portrayal of alienation remains strikingly relevant to contemporary conditions shaped by industrialization, capitalism, and mechanized social relations. Haider (2025) observes that Kafka's depiction of isolation reflects not only early twentieth-century anxieties but also the intensified alienation of the postmodern era, where economic utility and social rank eclipse intrinsic human value. Consequently, Kafka's critique of a world governed by bureaucratic rationality and capitalist logic reads as a prophetic diagnosis of dehumanization under modern systems of power.

At this point, recent eco-critical and post-humanist scholarship has significantly reframed Kafka's work by challenging anthropocentrism and the ideology of human exceptionalism. Rather than interpreting Gregor's transformation as a fall from humanity, contemporary critics read it as an interrogation of the very categories of *human*, *animal*, and *nature*. In other words, Kafka compels readers to question whether moral worth and subjectivity depend upon human form. By preserving Gregor's inner consciousness throughout his transformation, Kafka destabilizes hierarchical distinctions that privilege the human, thereby anticipating post-humanist thought that seeks to decenter the human and recognize non-human agency (Elhalafawy, 2023). As a result, Kafka's narrative technique itself becomes an ethical intervention, forcing readers to inhabit perspectives excluded by anthropocentric frameworks.

In parallel, the growth of environmental humanities has encouraged eco-critical readings of Kafka that foreground human–nature relations and ecological consciousness. Ecocriticism, as Tajane (2024) explains, examines how literary texts represent nature, environmental degradation, and ecological crisis. Within this framework, Kafka's animal narratives and metamorphic bodies reveal how domination of nature is inseparable from social and institutional oppression. Thus, Kafka's fiction exposes the ideological continuity between anthropocentrism, bureaucratic power, and capitalist exploitation.

Equally important, Kafka's use of animal figures has attracted sustained attention from animal studies and zoocritical scholarship. Unlike traditional literary representations that reduce animals to metaphors or allegories, Kafka's animals resist symbolic containment and display agency, subjectivity, and intentionality. Baghban and Poursanati (2024) argue that contemporary criticism must move beyond allegorical readings to recognize animals as autonomous beings, while Devi (2025) situates Kafka within zoocriticism, a branch of ecocriticism that critiques anthropocentric narratives. Accordingly, Kafka's animal stories align with anti-speciesist perspectives that challenge hierarchical distinctions between human and animal life, presenting non-human beings as intrinsically valuable rather than instrumentally useful (Al-Doory, 2024).

Moreover, confinement emerges as one of Kafka's most persistent thematic concerns, manifesting through bureaucratic systems, familial structures, and psychological compulsions. Traditionally, these motifs were interpreted politically or psychologically; however, eco-critical and post-humanist readings reveal that confinement in Kafka operates at an ontological level. The paradox encapsulated in the title—*Wings That Fail, Cages That Prevail*—captures how the possibility of escape exists only to be systematically negated. Significantly, Kafka's protagonists often possess resources that should enable freedom, yet structural forces render such efforts futile, suggesting that failure is embedded within the very architecture of Kafka's worlds.

From a post-humanist perspective, Kafka's narratives become explorations of distributed agency, where power circulates among human, non-human, institutional, and technological actors. Love and Wilbur (2025) define post-humanism as a framework that decentralizes human agency, while Murriss (2016) emphasizes its challenge to the autonomous human subject. In Kafka's fiction, characters are consistently shaped by forces beyond their control—bureaucracies, bodily transformations, and incomprehensible authorities—thereby exposing the fragility of humanist assumptions about autonomy and mastery (Moldovan, 2024). Consequently, Kafka's work resonates strongly with post-humanist ethics that demand recognition of non-human subjectivity and agency.

Historically, Kafka's work is deeply embedded within the modernist crisis of dehumanization characteristic of early twentieth-century capitalism. Scholarship situates Kafka alongside other modernist writers concerned with mechanization, bureaucratic domination, and the erosion of individual agency. However, Kafka distinguishes himself through his relentless examination of how dehumanization permeates every level of existence—from social institutions to bodily experience itself. This concern is especially evident in *The Burrow*, where Kafka adopts a non-human perspective to explore anxiety, sound, and material agency. Engelstein's (2025) analysis of Kafka's illness reveals how embodied experience informed his exploration of non-human perception, demonstrating how sensory and biological forces shape consciousness beyond rational control.

Finally, Kafka's influence on later literature and cultural discourse underscores the enduring relevance of his work. The term *Kafkaesque* has come to signify bureaucratic absurdity, surveillance, and existential helplessness, reflecting the continued applicability of his insights. Taken together, existentialism, ecocriticism, animal studies, post-humanism, and historical materialism reveal Kafka as a writer whose *broken trails* expose the persistent failure of escape within systems of domination. Ultimately, Kafka's literature offers no resolution but sustains critical questioning, reminding readers that recognizing confinement, resisting false consolation, and interrogating anthropocentric assumptions remain vital forms of intellectual and ethical engagement in the contemporary world.

Research Gap

Despite the extensive and evolving body of Kafka scholarship addressing alienation, bureaucracy, existential anxiety, ecocriticism, post-humanism, and animal studies, a significant conceptual and methodological gap remains. While existing studies have richly examined Kafka's representations of confinement—whether through bureaucratic systems, bodily transformation, or non-human perspectives—most analyses continue to treat confinement as a static condition rather than a dynamic process shaped by repeated, failed movements toward freedom. In other words, the critical focus has largely remained on the *existence* of the cage, with insufficient attention paid to the *processes of attempted escape* that precede, accompany, and ultimately reinforce confinement.

Furthermore, although recent eco-critical, post-humanist, and zoo-critical approaches have productively decentered the human and foregrounded non-human agency, these frameworks have rarely been brought into sustained dialogue with Kafka's recurring motif of movement that collapses—what this study conceptualizes as the *broken trail*. As a result, Kafka's imagery of flight, metamorphosis, and mobility is often interpreted symbolically or ontologically, but not systematically theorized as structural failure engineered by institutional, psychological, and epistemic systems of power. This leaves underexplored how aspiration itself becomes a mechanism through which domination is reproduced.

Moreover, existing scholarship tends to isolate Kafka's themes within specific theoretical traditions—existentialism, modernism, ecocriticism, or post-humanism—without sufficiently integrating these perspectives to explain how freedom is not merely denied but structurally rendered impossible. The paradox, whereby Kafka's protagonists possess the desire, consciousness, or even apparent means to escape, yet remain trapped within self-reinforcing systems, has not been adequately examined as a defining condition of modern subjectivity. Consequently, the repetitive failure of escape has not been conceptualized as a central organizing logic of Kafka's fictional worlds.

Additionally, while Kafka's global relevance is frequently acknowledged, particularly through the notion of the *Kafkaesque* there is a lack of focused studies that explicitly connect Kafka's motifs of failed mobility and systemic obstruction to contemporary postcolonial bureaucratic realities, especially in contexts marked by administrative inertia, surveillance, and institutional opacity. This absence limits the explanatory power of Kafka's work for understanding modern experiences of power beyond its European modernist origins.

Therefore, a clear research gap exists for a study that foregrounds movement, failure, and repetition as central analytical categories in Kafka's fiction. There is a need for a dynamic re-reading that conceptualizes the *broken trail* as a structural condition—one in which every attempt at flight paradoxically strengthens the cage. Addressing this gap allows for a more integrated understanding of Kafka's engagement with power, agency, and subjectivity, and repositions his work as a vital critical lens for interrogating both modern and postcolonial systems of domination.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design because it seeks to explore symbolic meanings, narrative patterns, and philosophical implications embedded in Franz Kafka's fiction rather than to measure phenomena empirically. Qualitative literary analysis is particularly suitable, as it enables the researcher to examine how literary texts construct meaning through metaphor, narrative logic, and thematic repetition; moreover, it allows for close engagement with Kafka's language, imagery, and narrative structures. Such engagement is central to understanding the paradox of failed freedom articulated through the metaphors of *wings*, *cages*, and the *broken trail*, which recur across Kafka's major works.

The study employs a textual and thematic analytical approach, using close reading as its primary method. Kafka's major works—*The Metamorphosis*, *In the Penal Colony*, *The Trial*, and *The Burrow*—are examined to identify recurring motifs of flight, confinement, metamorphosis, surveillance, and failed mobility. These motifs are not treated as isolated symbols; instead, they are analyzed as part of a dynamic system in which attempts at liberation repeatedly collapse. Consequently, the analysis foregrounds movement, failure, and repetition rather than static representations of imprisonment, thereby aligning directly with the study's research objectives and questions.

The primary data consists of selected Kafka texts that explicitly dramatize the tension between aspiration and confinement, particularly through protagonists who seek psychological, physical, or existential escape yet remain trapped within opaque systems of control. Furthermore, these works incorporate diverse narrative perspectives, including non-human consciousness, which supports the study's post-human and ontological inquiry. Secondary data includes peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and critical essays addressing Kafka, modernity, bureaucracy, existentialism, ecocriticism, and post-humanism; thus, the analysis is situated within established academic debates while offering a distinct interpretive contribution.

The analysis proceeds through thematic coding and interpretive synthesis. Initially, textual passages depicting movement, transformation, or aspiration are identified; then, these passages are examined alongside moments of obstruction, punishment, and recursive confinement. However, rather than treating failure as incidental or accidental, the study interprets it as structurally embedded within Kafka's fictional worlds. Themes such as failed flight, institutional opacity, distributed agency, and self-reinforcing confinement are developed inductively from the texts. Moreover, comparative analysis across the selected works reveals how similar narrative patterns recur despite differing characters and settings; therefore, this repetition strengthens the argument that Kafka constructs a systematic logic in which freedom is not merely denied but engineered to fail. Interpretations are consistently grounded in theoretical discourse to ensure analytical rigor and coherence.

The study is anchored in an integrated theoretical framework that draws on existentialism, Weberian theories of bureaucracy, post-humanism, and critical theories of modernity. Existentialist thinkers such as Sartre (1956) and Camus (1942) provide a foundational lens for understanding Kafka's representation of human aspiration within an absurd and indifferent world. In Kafka's fiction, characters seek autonomy and transcendence; however, these efforts consistently result in frustration, guilt, or deeper entrapment. Thus, existentialism helps explain the internal dimension of the *broken trail*, where consciousness itself becomes a site of conflict and disorientation.

At the institutional level, Max Weber's (1946) concept of bureaucratic rationality and the *iron cage* is central to understanding Kafka's depiction of systemic confinement. Kafka's bureaucracies operate without transparency or accountability; consequently, individuals are subjected to impersonal systems they cannot comprehend or resist. Moreover, legal and administrative structures transform aspiration into liability, reinforcing domination through procedural logic rather than overt coercion.

Post-humanist theory further extends this analysis by challenging the notion of autonomous human agency. Scholars such as Murriss (2016) and Love and Wilbur (2025) emphasize distributed agency across human, non-human, institutional, and material forces. In Kafka's narratives, power circulates through bodies, animals, technologies, architectural spaces, and sound; therefore, failure is not solely the result of individual weakness but emerges from a network of interacting forces that shape subjectivity. This framework is particularly relevant to *The Metamorphosis* and *The Burrow*, where non-human perspectives destabilize humanist assumptions about control and freedom.

Finally, theories of modernity and dehumanization contextualize Kafka within the broader crisis of early twentieth-century capitalism. Scholars such as Sokel (2002) and Corngold (2004) demonstrate how Kafka exposes the fragmentation of identity under modern systems of labor and governance. Furthermore, this study extends their insights by arguing that modernity in Kafka is

defined not merely by confinement but by the systematic failure of escape. Otherwise stated, modern power does not simply block freedom; it generates repeated, misdirected attempts at liberation that ultimately reinforce the cage itself.

Discussion/Analysis

Kafka's fictional world is structured around a persistent tension between aspiration and confinement, a tension this study frames through the metaphors of *wings*, *cages*, and the *broken trail*. Across *The Metamorphosis*, *The Trial*, *In the Penal Colony*, and *The Burrow*, Kafka repeatedly stages moments in which characters appear poised for movement, transformation, or liberation; however, these moments invariably collapse into deeper forms of restriction. The symbolic *wings* in Kafka's narratives represent not physical flight but existential striving—an impulse toward autonomy, recognition, and meaning. Nevertheless, these wings fail not because desire is absent, but because modern systems are designed to redirect aspiration into mechanisms of control. Consequently, Kafka's fiction exposes freedom as a structural illusion rather than an attainable condition.

In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa's transformation initially suggests a radical break from his alienated existence as a laboring body within capitalist modernity. His altered form might imply escape from economic obligation; besides this, it momentarily suspends his participation in exploitative labor. Yet this apparent liberation immediately gives way to intensified confinement. Gregor laments, *I cannot make you understand. I cannot make anyone understand what is happening inside me* (Kafka, 1915/2008, p. 89), revealing that while his body changes, the social structures surrounding him remain rigidly intact. Furthermore, the family home becomes a closed system where doors, schedules, and surveillance replace care. Gregor's wings—his transformation—fail precisely because liberation is unintelligible within a world governed by productivity and normative identity. Thus, Kafka illustrates that aspiration collapses when it cannot be recognized by dominant structures of meaning.

A similar dynamic unfolds in *The Trial*, where Josef K.'s aspiration takes the form of juridical mobility—the desire to understand, contest, and ultimately escape an opaque legal system. The novel famously opens with the declaration, *Someone must have been telling lies about Josef K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning* (Kafka, 1925/2008, p. 3). This sentence immediately establishes a world in which guilt precedes action, and movement is rendered meaningless. Josef K. actively seeks clarity through interviews, petitions, and explanations; however, each attempt draws him deeper into the system's labyrinth. Moreover, the court's spatial organization—attics, corridors, waiting rooms—creates the illusion of progress while ensuring stasis. The broken trail here functions as procedural motion without destination; otherwise stated, Kafka represents bureaucracy as a path that moves endlessly yet arrives nowhere. In *In the Penal Colony* radicalizes the metaphor of confinement by inscribing power directly onto the body. The condemned man, unaware of both his crime and sentence, embodies absolute dispossession. The Officer asserts, *The condemned man does not know the sentence; he will learn it on his body* (Kafka, 1919/2008, p. 146). Aspiration is entirely foreclosed in this narrative; nevertheless, Kafka exposes how systems persist even when stripped of ethical justification. The execution machine functions as a cage without walls, transforming law into mechanical inevitability. Furthermore, the Officer's unwavering faith in the apparatus demonstrates how institutional logic sustains itself through devotion rather than reason. The broken trail thus emerges as a system in which obedience replaces understanding and resistance becomes structurally impossible.

In *The Burrow*, Kafka internalizes the cage, shifting confinement from external institutions to psychological and architectural obsession. The narrator constructs an elaborate underground dwelling in pursuit of perfect security, claiming, *The most beautiful thing about my burrow is its silence* (Kafka, 1923/2008, p. 325). Yet this silence becomes a source of constant anxiety, as imagined threats multiply in the absence of visible danger. Consequently, the attempt to achieve freedom through control produces intensified fear rather than peace. Besides this, the narrator's obsessive modifications reveal how modern subjects internalize surveillance and discipline. The wings of self-determination fail because the subject becomes both prisoner and guard, demonstrating that confinement no longer requires external enforcement.

Taken collectively, these texts reveal that Kafka's *cages* operate across institutional, familial, corporeal, and psychological dimensions. Importantly, these cages are rarely overtly violent; rather, they function through delay, ambiguity, repetition, and internalization. Moreover, Kafka's depiction of distributed agency anticipates post-humanist insights, as power circulates through machines, architecture, animals, and bureaucratic procedures. Failure, therefore, cannot be attributed to individual weakness alone; instead, it emerges from systems that exceed and reshape human agency.

The metaphor of the *broken trail* is central to understanding Kafka's critique of modernity. His characters are never static; they move, build, argue, and transform. However, this movement is structurally misdirected. Unlike classical narratives of escape or rebellion, Kafka presents freedom as something that is continuously promised yet systematically denied. Furthermore, modern power in Kafka's fiction does not simply prohibit movement; it organizes movement in ways that guarantee failure. Thus, the broken trail becomes a defining condition of modern existence, marked by perpetual effort without transformation.

Kafka's relevance extends beyond European modernism into contemporary and postcolonial contexts characterized by bureaucratic inertia, surveillance, and administrative opacity. In postcolonial societies, individuals often navigate institutions inherited from colonial regimes—legal systems, documentation practices, and administrative hierarchies that obscure accountability. Kafka's depiction of power without clarity resonates strongly within these realities. Moreover, the Kafkaesque condition—where individuals are trapped in systems they cannot comprehend—mirrors experiences of governance where authority is dispersed and responsibility perpetually deferred.

In addressing the research questions, this analysis demonstrates that Kafka represents aspiration and confinement not as opposing forces but as interdependent mechanisms within modern systems of control. The *wings* fail because they are structurally anticipated and neutralized by the *cages* that surround them. The *broken trail* reveals how freedom collapses not through repression alone but through systemic misdirection. Furthermore, this dynamic reading of Kafka moves beyond static interpretations of imprisonment to illuminate power as mobile, recursive, and self-reinforcing. Ultimately, Kafka's fiction reveals that the tragedy of modern life lies not in the absence of desire for freedom, but in the certainty that every path toward it has already been designed to fail.

Finding/Results

- Kafka consistently represents *wings* as metaphors for aspiration, transformation, and the desire for liberation; however, these wings are structurally designed to fail rather than enable escape.



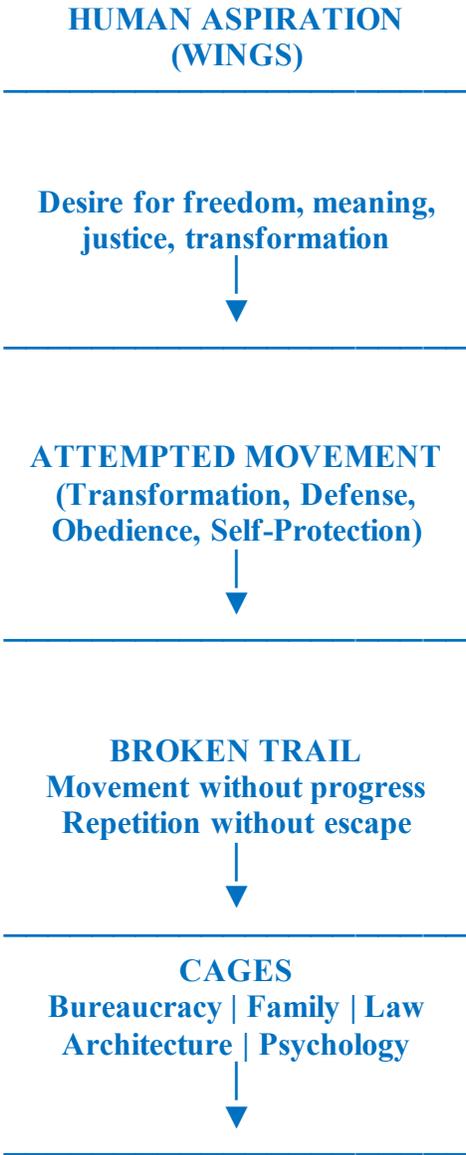
- Acts of movement—metamorphosis (*The Metamorphosis*), juridical defense (*The Trial*), obedience (*In the Penal Colony*), and architectural control (*The Burrow*)—initially suggest the possibility of freedom but culminate in intensified confinement.
- Aspiration in Kafka's fiction functions as a trap; moreover, the more earnestly characters attempt to transcend their conditions, the more deeply they become entangled within controlling systems.
- Freedom is not denied outright; instead, it is offered conditionally and deferred endlessly, creating the illusion of agency while ensuring its collapse.
- Kafka's *cages* extend beyond physical imprisonment to include bureaucratic procedures, familial structures, internalized discipline, and psychological obsession.
- Institutional cages operate through opacity, delay, and procedural repetition rather than overt violence; furthermore, power remains un-locatable and thus uncontestable.
- Psychological cages emerge as characters internalize surveillance and discipline, becoming active participants in their own confinement.
- The absence of visible authority does not weaken control; instead, it strengthens it by diffusing responsibility across systems and subjects.
- The *broken trail* symbolizes movement without progress, where paths exist but lead nowhere meaningful.
- Kafka's characters are perpetually in motion—seeking justice, safety, explanation, or escape—yet these efforts produce repetition rather than transformation.
- Failure is not accidental but systemic; consequently, mobility becomes a mechanism of control rather than resistance.
- The broken trail reveals modernity as a condition defined by misdirected effort and engineered futility.
- Kafka's depictions of bureaucratic opacity and administrative power resonate strongly with postcolonial governance structures inherited from colonial regimes.
- Legal ambiguity, delayed justice, and documentation-based authority in Kafka mirror contemporary experiences of surveillance and institutional inertia.
- Subjects in postcolonial contexts often experience movement (applications, appeals, procedures) without resolution; besides this, responsibility remains perpetually deferred.
- Kafka's work anticipates modern forms of algorithmic and administrative control, where power is decentralized yet omnipresent.

The findings of this study are theoretically significant as they position Kafka's fiction at the intersection of existentialism, bureaucratic theory, post-humanism, and critiques of modern power. From an existentialist perspective, the repeated failure of aspiration reflects the human struggle for meaning within an indifferent world; however, Kafka extends this insight by showing that absurdity is not merely cosmic but institutionally produced. Thus, existential anxiety becomes structurally embedded within modern systems.

Weber's concept of the *iron cage* is directly affirmed by the findings, as Kafka's bureaucracies exemplify rational systems that entrap rather than liberate. Nevertheless, Kafka complicates Weber by revealing that the cage is not static; it is dynamic, adaptive, and internally maintained. Furthermore, the findings align with post-humanist theory by demonstrating that agency in Kafka's world is distributed across non-human actors such as machines, architecture, procedures, and sounds. Power, therefore, operates through networks rather than centralized authority.

The metaphor, moreover, of the broken trail advances critical modernity studies by conceptualizing failure as systemic rather than incidental. Unlike traditional models where domination blocks resistance, Kafka depicts systems that invite participation while guaranteeing defeat. This insight is particularly valuable for postcolonial analysis, as it illuminates how administrative and legal structures perpetuate control under the guise of order and rationality. The findings, ultimately, contribute a dynamic reinterpretation of Kafka that shifts critical focus from static imprisonment to recursive failure. By foregrounding movement, aspiration, and misdirection, this study demonstrates that Kafka’s enduring relevance lies in his exposure of modern power as a system that allows motion but prevents arrival. Consequently, Kafka’s fiction offers a profound critique of modern subjectivity, revealing a world where wings exist, cages prevail, and every trail is already broken.

Visual Thematic Mapping of Findings



INTERNALIZATION OF CONTROL

Self-surveillance, guilt,
obedience, anxiety



Conclusion

This study set out to address a critical gap in Kafka scholarship: while much research has focused on static representations of confinement, little attention has been given to the dynamic interplay between human aspiration (wings) and systemic entrapment (cages), conceptualized here as the *broken trail*. Kafka's narratives, particularly *The Metamorphosis*, *The Trial*, *In the Penal Colony*, and *The Burrow*, depict protagonists striving for liberation yet repeatedly encountering structural obstacles that render their efforts futile; consequently, the research problem centered on understanding how Kafka constructs failure as a systemic, rather than incidental, feature of modern existence, and how these motifs resonate with contemporary and postcolonial realities. The findings reveal that human aspiration is inherently paradoxical, as wings symbolize desire, transformation, and the pursuit of freedom, yet these attempts at liberation systematically fail, intensifying entrapment (Kafka, 1915/2008; 1923/2008); furthermore, *cages* extend beyond physical imprisonment to encompass institutional, psychological, and existential forms of control, operating through procedural opacity, internalized discipline, and diffused responsibility. Moreover, the metaphor of the broken trail illustrates that failure is structurally embedded, so mobility and effort do not guarantee liberation but instead reinforce the systems of constraint; besides this, Kafka's motifs demonstrate enduring relevance in postcolonial and contemporary bureaucratic contexts, where legal ambiguity, surveillance, and administrative inertia replicate similar patterns of systemic frustration and deferred responsibility. Theoretically, these findings advance existential, Weberian, and post-humanist frameworks by demonstrating that modern power functions not merely through overt domination but through recursive, adaptive mechanisms that structure failure as part of experience; practically, Kafka's insights offer a lens for interpreting contemporary bureaucratic, postcolonial, and organizational contexts, emphasizing how aspiration and agency are conditioned by structural forces. Nevertheless, the study is limited by its focus on Kafka's major texts and reliance on qualitative analysis, which excludes minor works and empirical investigation into real-world bureaucratic or postcolonial contexts; however, future research could extend this study through comparative analyses, empirical studies of bureaucratic entrapment, and interdisciplinary explorations of digital and algorithmic forms of control. In conclusion, *Wings That Fail, Cages That Prevail: Reading Kafka Through a Broken Trail* demonstrates that Kafka's fiction offers a dynamic model of modern entrapment, where freedom is not merely obstructed but structurally engineered to fail; moreover, by foregrounding movement, aspiration, and systemic failure, the study repositions Kafka as a globally relevant critic of bureaucracy, power, and human vulnerability, ultimately reminding readers that wings may exist, cages will prevail, and every trail remains profoundly broken, yet recognizing and interrogating these patterns is itself an essential step toward understanding the human condition.

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