



## KOBO ABE: HIS LIFE, STYLE, AND HIS MOST FAMOUS WORK *THE WOMAN IN THE DUNES*

**S. MANOJ**

Assistant Professor of English,  
Agurchand Manmull Jain College (Shift II),  
Affiliated to University of Madras,  
Meenambakkam, Chennai 600114.  
(TN) INDIA

### ABSTRACT

*This research paper is a detailed study on Kobo Abe in general, and in particular it explores his style and his monumental work The Woman in the Dunes. His themes, inspirations, influence, likes and dislikes are also touched upon in this research paper which is all about Kobo Abe.*

**Keywords:** Japanese Literature, Kobo Abe, Existentialism, Kafka, The Woman in the Dunes.

### INTRODUCTION

Kobo Abe, who holds an important position in contemporary Japanese literature, was born in Tokyo, Japan, on March 7, 1924. He was born Kimifusa Abe, the name which he later changed into Kobo Abe as he was displaced from Japan to China when he was an infant. Various other factors like Militant Nationalism and Japanese army's conduct played a role in him opting for a Chinese sounding name. He was an ardent reader of philosophies of Friedrich Nietzsche and Karl Jaspers, and in literary works he preferred to read works by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Edgar Allan Poe, and Franz Kafka.

In 1943, he joined Tokyo University for a career in medicine even though he wasn't interested in it but purely opted for it on his parent's insistence. While the Second World War was nearing its end, Abe made his foray into writing by trying his hand in poetry and fiction. His first novel, *The Road Sign at the End of the Road*, was published in 1948.

S. MANOJ

1Page



He gave up his practice in medicine as he took no pleasure in it and also mainly because of the literary success he enjoyed. He found an outlet through his literary works whereas his pursuit for a medicinal career made him go mad literally, and he went ahead to check himself in a mental hospital to check if there was something wrong in him mentally.

In the wake of World War II following Japan's military defeat, Abe became a part of avant-garde writers and intellectuals who tried to reassert humanistic values through their works. Hanada Kiyoteru was the driving force who influenced and made Abe take interest in combining European Surrealism and Marxism. The influence bore fruit for him as he was slowly becoming known for his works. His short story "Red Cocoon" (1950) and his novel *The Crime of Mr. S. Karuma* (1951) fetched him prizes and took him to great heights and made him one among the greats.

His novels exploring alienation and loss of identity caught the attention of people across the globe and one got to know the horrendous experiences that the people of Japanese society went through after Second World War by reading his works. While some of the traditional Japanese writers had envisioned a more pastoral vision of the nation, Abe conceived narratives of urban alienation keeping in mind the rapid urbanization of Japan after the Second World War. And Hiroshima and Nagasaki destroyed by atomic weapons was lingering at the back, and it had its traces in the postwar Japanese culture.

As Abe grew away from Japan, right from the time when he was an infant, his works lack traits which can be qualified as "Truly Japanese". His works are far removed from the aim, form and pattern of a literary work which has been formulated and prescribed by his Japanese predecessors. He also didn't follow and get influenced by the traditional cultural forms such as Noh theatre in his works.

Abe's novels, plays and screenplays were a source of inspiration of western cult literary works as he drew heavily from them for his influences, rather than taking a cue from Japanese sources. He considered the western literature as his model and steered clear from following native Japanese literature. His works were huge successes in being translated into English and many other languages, and no doubt he is one of the Japanese writers who have been read by most people across the globe.

He was influenced by the works of western writers, some of them are, Friedrich Nietzsche, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Edgar Allan Poe, and Franz Kafka. As a fifteen year old, Abe remembers narrating the stories of Edgar Allan Poe to his classmates, and when he was done with narrating Poe's stories, he began to create stories on his own for narration.



His tenure in the field of medicine seems to have created a huge impact on his style of writing. It has made him describe situations and varied amount of emotions with detached precision. He is often kept in parallel and compared with Russian playwright Anton Chekhov and Japanese Meiji writer Mori Ogai for their sameness in their objective approach, and coincidentally, they were also trained in medicine.

Abe's works fall into different genres, their tone, pattern, style, the way in which the plot is treated and all other factors differ, but his works always had something to do with alienation or loss of identity. They have been the recurrent themes in his works. It has more to do with him being moved out of Japan when he was an infant. He had no idea about Japanese customs, culture and various other traditional practices. Abe saw the theme of loneliness as completely new to Japanese literary works as Japan was always seen as a rural space and loneliness was attributed to fast paced urban life. He envisioned rapid growth in all spheres and saw Japan as an urban nation where the cities are confined, modern, intricate and complex.

His works have layers of meaning, beyond body implications with a combination of uncompromisingly realistic, crude, and often fantastical elements. Abe was the person who gave life to Japanese literature by writing literary works which dealt with meaninglessness of life and he was considered to be an exponent of avant-garde literature. Abe bore resemblance to Haruki Murakami when it came to their vision of life, human existence and their plight.

Abe's works have garnered mixed reviews both in Japan and around the globe. While the critics from the western parts have expressed their disappointment over complete lack of Japanese elements and qualities which portray things which are truly Japanese, other critics such as Hisaaki Yamanouchi have rated Abe's works so highly for their universal appeal and they being devoid of any Japanese elements.

Abe had no problems in accepting the fact that his works were far removed from Japanese literary tradition and he cited his restrained relationship with his home country as the prime cause for it. To add he never saw himself as a writer who mirrored Japanese culture and tradition, because he only knew little of it.

Although Abe has written many works, the work that brought worldwide recognition and fame is undoubtedly *The Woman in the Dunes*. This work of his took him to newer heights and help increase his fortune. It made him to be rated one among all time Japanese literary greats. The novel was published in 1962 and it was adapted to screen by Abe, while Hiroshi Teshigahara directed the film. The film was a stupendous hit at the Cannes Film Festival and it garnered rave reviews from all sections. The movie was made on a modest budget in spite

S. MANOJ

3P a g e



of the highly imaginative landscape which was needed and which would have taken the film's budget to epic proportions. The book by Abe remains one of the most appreciated and well received works from postwar Japan. It is widely regarded as a Kafkaesque novel which questions the very human existence and the meaning behind it.

## The Woman in the Dunes

The novel opens with Niki Jumpei, an amateur entomologist, walking on the dunes in search of a new species of beetle which he thinks will exist in a place which is full of sand. He comes in search of it to enter his name into the insect book as a proud founder of a new species, and he thinks his discovery of a new species will make him popular and stand apart from other people. He has come all the way from the city to this particular remote village which looks every bit abnormal. He has ventured too far into the village to return for the last bus which will take him to the city, and as expected he misses the bus for the day.

He is astounded by the striking visual distinctness of the village, mainly due to the setting of the village. In the village, the houses are 65-ft below the ground level. It is but an amusing factor that life even sixty five feet below the surface level still goes on. Niki Jumpei (the narrator) places the camera to take some pictures of the bizarre landscape and show it to people of his journey. An old man from the village mistakes Niki Jumpei for a person who has been sent by the government to make an inspection of the village. He speaks with his fellow villagers about the presence of a suspicion evoking man, they ask him to enquire to avoid any problem which may affect the villagers in the future. The old man is quite hesitant to reach out to the narrator to know about him but he has been told by his fellow villagers which he can't forego. Everything gets back to normal or at least it seems so when Niki Jumpei says that he is a teacher who has come to the village on the lookout for insects.

The narrator requests for a place to stay for the night as he has missed the last bus. The old man after consulting with fellow villagers takes him to the village office where there is placard which says 'love your home' which is kind of a forewarning. The forewarning is missed by both the narrator and the readers of the novel. After the visit to the village office the old man takes the narrator to a house when it's almost nightfall. The house lies in a hole which is almost 35 feet tall even from the top of the house, for which the narrator is given a rope ladder to climb down into the hole. It was pitch dark and the narrator with him in the rope ladder doesn't know where he is heading to. He doesn't know if he had reached the bottom or he is still in the middle. The only thing he was sure of is that he was airborne. And at last when he reached the surface of the hole there was a woman waiting with a light in her hand welcoming the narrator.



The woman announces that the dinner would be ready in a few minutes and enquires the narrator if he needs something else. The narrator says that he would like to have a bath and clean himself up as he had spent the whole day out in the grueling heat of the dunes. The woman replies that he can have a bath tomorrow as they would have enough for their use when the villagers bring it part of their weekly rations. The narrator is amused and answers that he won't be staying for tomorrow, listening to which the woman remains silent and carries on with her preparation of dinner. The silence of the woman doesn't startle the narrator and he fails to see the disappointment in her eyes when he spoke those words. When the dinner is ready the narrator has his dinner under an umbrella to prevent the sand from falling into the food as the sand keeps falling into the portions of the house. The narrator at first thinks that eating under an umbrella is part of their tradition of treating guests, but the woman tells him about the sands seeping incessantly throughout the house.

After the narrator finishes his dinner, he notices the woman using the sand to clean the vessels. He doesn't know if it's the right way to clean the vessels, but the people have no other go in this village where sand has become part of their life. The dampness of the sand too in a way comes out handy in the process of cleaning the vessels. Sometime after the dinner the narrator goes about his job with insects and carefully pins them to the box which he has brought with him.

He is almost ready for bed when the woman borrows the only available kerosene lamp from him and goes into the other room. There are some strange sounds coming out of the room where the women went. The narrator, after a few minutes goes to have a look at the woman in the next room, to his surprise he sees her shoveling continuously. He wants her to stop shoveling and go to bed as it is time to sleep. But she keeps shoveling continuously and fills the kerosene can which will be lifted by the villagers. She says that that it is easy to shovel in the night as the sand becomes damp, and if they don't shovel the house would be buried as the sand keeps falling. She fills the shoveled sand in kerosene cans and the villagers pull the kerosene cans up using a rope. The vehicle comes to take away the sand which has been filled in the kerosene can. The narrator goes to bed in a fit of anger as the woman keeps shoveling in spite of his request to go to bed. It is a thing of speculation as to whether the narrator wants the woman to go to bed or he wants her to sleep with him.

The next morning the narrator is startled to see the woman naked with only a piece of cloth covering her face. She has no clothes on her body but the sand has formed a layer over her. It shows the mountains and curves of her body. The woman doesn't wear anything at night as it will help avoid her developing rashes in her body. Wearing innerwear at night will make one perspire at night and with the sand continuously pouring would mix with the perspiration and



develop rashes in and around the body. That is the reason why the villagers doesn't wear innerwear at night and no one is going to notice a person who is 65 feet below.

The narrator slowly comes out of the house welcomed by the blazing sun which denotes that it's almost noon. When gets out of the house to his amusement he realizes that the rope ladder has been taken away. He doesn't know what to do and looks around to see if the ladder has been kept in a different place. He feels dejected and angry. He rushes into the house and enquires the woman who wakes up from her deep slumber and takes cover to save from her body being exposed which has been already exposed. She dresses up and sits in a crouching position. She remains passive throughout his questioning as if she is part of the conspiracy of the villagers. With the ladder being taken off by the villagers and going by the woman's reaction he comes to know that he has fallen into the trap laid by the villagers. What he has thought to be a single night stay has turned out to be everlasting.

An extra shovel, kerosene can, and rations are served to the house with the existing weekly rations. The narrator realizes that the extra shovel is for him only a little later. He shouts at the villagers and the woman for keeping him as a helpless captive in the hole, and he warns them that the government would take effective measures to search for him, and once they find him the villagers would be thrown into jail. The villagers give little heed to his warning as they go about doing their works.

As day passes by, the narrator charts out a plan to keep the woman as captive and blackmail the villagers and to get out of the pit. He attacks the woman and ties her hand and legs. When the villagers come to know of it, they stop sending weekly rations. The narrator and the woman have a harrowing time as the water supply too was cut down. A bundle containing cheap Sake and packs of cigarettes was put into the hole. The narrator thinks this as a symbol of victory as the narrator was holding the woman as captive and he thinks that the villagers have finally given in. The woman informs that the villagers used to supply cigarettes and Sake for the men in the houses. The narrator feels very thirsty and drinks the Sake which makes him feel as if his whole body is on fire. The woman refuses to drink the Sake. The Sake does not help quench his thirst but only increases his thirst to unspoken levels.

The narrator thought that he was in the driver's seat as he had the woman captive, but the villagers had the water on their side as a weapon of threat to induce thirst. The narrator with no other option unties the woman and asks her what to do to get water from the villagers. The woman insists on shoveling which will lead them into being supplied with water. She points the fire tower from which a person will be overseeing the proceedings in every house and the person in the fire tower also will report to the villagers on their change of stance and ask the villagers to supply them water.

S. MANOJ

6P a g e



The narrator starts shoveling and in no time they are supplied with a bucket full of water. The narrator and the woman rush towards the water pushing each other like animals charge towards their prey. They quench their thirst and have water to their fill as if there is no tomorrow and go about their works. After some days, the narrator in a fit of rage picks up the shovel and strikes the interiors of the house. The wooden windows and doors have turned into sponges because of the dampness of the sand. The sand even has the capacity to rot beams. When the narrator breaks the window which results in the sand pouring into the house, the woman tries to stop the narrator and they both fall down against each other and in the process the narrator's right hand lies accidentally over the woman's breast. Then the woman goes into the other room and removes her innerwear in full view of the narrator. This stimulates the narrator furthermore.

In an avalanche of sorts, sand flows continuously over them and after the downpour ends, they help clean up each other. They start to clean each other slowly and it slowly turns into a fore-play of sorts. It gains intensity and both the narrator and the woman were in no mood to stop. And the cleaning up process ends up with their physical union. The narrator compares the woman with the woman who are in the city who he says are nothing but bag of bones, he considers the woman in the village as full woman.

The painful bondage of his makes him draw plans to escape from the hole. He collects the old clothes of the woman and bits of cloth with which he makes a lengthy rope. He plans to escape in the evening which will avoid him being seen by the villagers and particularly by the person in the fire tower. And on the forty-sixth day of his bondage he readies himself to escape from the hole. He packs his instruments beforehand and keeps it near the doorway outside the house. He acts natural before the woman and they bath each other vigorously and they have sex. The narrator finishes the sexual act in no time and the woman almost falls off because she was sucked off her energy. The narrator makes the woman stone drunk with the cheap Sake which has been supplied to them by the villager's part of their weekly rations. The woman falls asleep and the narrator adjusts her dress and checks her to see if she is awake.

The narrator places a cloth over her face as it would help stop sand from falling on her face. He feels bad for the woman as she would be all alone and no one to tend after her. She has lost her husband and her daughter in a sand slide. She doesn't want to go out of the house as she doesn't feel like going and there is none related to her. The narrator promises to himself that he would come back to her rescue with government forces. He also wants to buy her a radio. The narrator thinks what would be the reaction of the woman when she wakes up. Would she make it a big issue with her hue and cry or she would ready herself for the life

S. MANOJ

7Page



after his disappearance. He comes to the present and thinks that it is not the time to get sentimental and he has a job in hand to look after. First he has to escape from the village and only then he would be able to bring in troops to take on the villagers who have given him a tough time.

He takes the rope and swings it towards the area where the sand bags are arranged at the top rather than aiming for the pulley. He thinks that aiming at the sandbags would bear fruit than aiming at a pulley which is small in size and tough to hold on to for the rope. He had lost count of the times he swung which all had resulted in vain. And with finally with no utter hope he swung the rope, which to his surprise and excitement stuck to the sand bags. He was very happy and he envisioned himself taking a walk as a free man. And when the rope was set, the narrator clung to the rope and climbed without any bodily movements like trembling or shaking as to avoid dashing into the sand. He made slow careful movements and finally reached the top which made him breath fresh air after forty-six days of bondage.

The narrator took cover and moved into a safe place to avoid being seen by the person from the fire tower or by any of the villagers. The sun had almost set and it was the time for the villagers to come to collect the sand. He needs to move quickly from the place to avoid getting caught. He starts running in the direction which would take him to the road. From the road it would be easy for him to catch the bus. But getting to the road is the toughest of the lot as it is very dark and he doesn't know towards which direction he is running.

After running for so long he notices that he has been running in a circle and he has reached the point where he had started from. He starts again and runs fast as he notices some dogs were barking at him with few of the villagers following him with flashlights in their hand. In an attempt to avoid the villagers who follow him, he runs too fast and accidentally falls into boggy land in fear of getting caught. The villagers stood around him smiling and mocking at him. The villagers ask him to hold on to a log which they throw to him, he catches hold of the log to avoid getting drowned. When the narrator holds the log the villagers shovel around him carefully and take him out of the bog land as if they are uprooting a plant. He felt ashamed to be rescued by the villagers but he had to go through with it as he had no other means to escape death, he merely wanted to survive at that point of time.

And when the narrator entered the house he saw the woman crying like an innocent child. They never spoke a word to each other, he went to the bed straightaway and he didn't remember when the woman came to bed. Few days after his escaping drama, he asked the old man of the village if he could be allowed to have a ladder to reach the top and to walk for a few minutes with the sea breeze. It was to be allowed the old man said but on one condition that the narrator was to have sex with the woman with the full view of villagers. The narrator

**S. MANOJ**

8P a g e





was ready to do anything to get a breath of fresh air. He tries to convince the woman to have sex with him before the villagers. The woman refuses to adhere to his wish and asks if he is sex mad or something. He has no other go as he pulls the woman out of the house and tears her dress. The woman resists the attempt and punches and kicks the narrator. He overpowers her and keeps her in his control and as the resistance of the woman gradually lessens, he manhandles the woman and molests her in full view of the villagers.

His fortune doesn't change after that incident of rape in full public view and he was badly in need to be freed from his bondage. He thought of sending signal through crows by tying a piece of paper to its legs which says about him being kept as captive by the villagers. He comes up with a plan to catch a crow which would help him send message to someone. He fears what would happen if the villagers themselves get the message sent by the narrator. He buries a bucket in the sand, and on top of it he lays a paper and a trap which is made of sticks which has a dried fish as bait. He names the trap as 'HOPE' which also stands as a symbol for his hope for something miraculous to happen in his life. He wants a turnaround of fortunes. The narrator keeps looking at the trap day after day with no avail. He only sees the dried fish melting and turning into bones in the hot and humid climate of the dunes. He changes the dried fish in regular intervals. He is heartbroken by the zero improvement which has been made in the case of the trap and he doesn't see the trap anymore.

After some days he is astonished to find water being accumulated in the bucket and finds out that the water is crystal clear compared to the water served by the villagers. He finds that the dampness of the sand has resulted in the accumulation of water. He researches more on it and feels that there will be a time when he won't be depending on the villagers for water. He feels very happy as if he had got his long yearned freedom. He wants to disclose and share his happiness with someone but he doesn't do it.

In due course, the woman gets pregnant and he starts helping with household chores to her surprise. His change in attitude was clear with his mannerisms and behavior. One day the woman complains of labor pain and she is taken to the hospital. She is lifted and carried by three-wheeled truck. She doesn't want to go and cries a lot. The narrator doesn't say a word and he just looks at the direction the truck takes. The truck leaves with the woman inside and the narrator doesn't accompany her. For the narrator's astonishment, the rope ladder which was used to carry the pregnant woman to the top was still lying there. The narrator couldn't believe his eyes and is very excited to see the rope ladder. The narrator climbs to the top and has a view of the sea which is the color of the sand. And when he looks down at the hole, he notices that someone has walked over the crow catching instrument which he had made and named 'Hope'. To the readers amusement the narrator doesn't escape but climbs down to the house and corrects the 'Hope'. He sees the shovel and starts to shovel the sand. He

**S. MANOJ**

9P a g e



compromises himself and goes on shoveling. The narrator seems to have changed his state of mind regarding his escape from the dunes and he doesn't go about his plan for the time being.

## REFERENCES

- Abe, Kobo. *The Woman in the Dunes*. Trans. E. Dale Saunders. New York: Vintage International, 1964. Print.
- Hardin, Nancy S., and Abe Kobo. "An Interview with Abe Kobo." *Contemporary Literature* 15.4 (1974): 439-456. *JSTOR*. Web. 23 Jan. 2014.
- Motoyama, Mutsuko. "The Literature and Politics of Abe Kōbō: Farewell to Communism in Suna No Onna." *Monumenta Nipponica* 50.3 (1995): 305-323. *JSTOR*. Web. 23 Jan. 2014.