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## The Bizarre World of the Dunes: An Existential Interpretation of Kobo Abe's *The Woman in the Dunes*

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### **Abstract**

The avant-garde Japanese novelist, Kobo Abe initiated a literary reformation and by deviating from the traditional style revolutionized Japanese literature both in form and content. Focusing on Abe's best known novel, *The Woman in the Dunes*, this paper intends to track the writer's preoccupation with the theme of existentialism, man's inherent alienation imposed by the social structure and his eventual quest to create a possible subjective meaning out of the general absurdity he is trapped in. The study indicates how the protagonist, Niki, is entrapped both by society -being subjected to forced labor- and by nature, being manifested either in the sand pit or the instinctual drives of his own human nature. It is concluded, eventually, with the protagonist's recognition that he can be saved if he tries to create a meaning for his absurd life.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, alienation, Kobo Abe, Woman in the Dunes

### **I. Introduction**

Japan, as a country which bore great damages during World War II suffered from deep anxieties, despair and psychological damages which were well manifested in the works of the modern avant-garde Japanese artists. Cuddon defines the term "avant-garde", when applied to literature and art, as denoting "exploration, path finding, innovation and invention; something new, something advanced and revolutionary" (Cuddon 68). As a result and in the Japanese social context, avant-garde is ascribed to those artists who happen to criticize the traditional culture and social system of Japan radically.

Kobo Abe, fascinated by picturing protagonists who suffer the dread of detachment and loss in modern Japanese society, can be truly called an avant-garde artist. He wrote to question "the legitimacy of philosophical and aesthetic boundaries based on national origin" (Cahill 2009) and in this way tried to find a new identity for Japan's modern existence.

Instead of treating the traditional oriental themes that ruled over Japanese literature, Abe's work after World War II is characterized by essentially western existential themes, and such involvements as what can be found in the works of the modern writers like Dostoevsky and Kafka with characters who struggle to assert their subjective self and exercise their will and

freedom, while experiencing deep anxiety, absurdity and nothingness of life. Abe researcher Timothy Iles refers to this quality of the writer's work in this way: "Abe is part of the system of Japanese literature, but he exists within this system as a ghost in the machine, as a proponent of radical social, structural change – as a writer who himself rejected any associations with 'Japanese literature' in favor of the broader context of world literature" (5).

The exploration of such existential themes in Abe's most famous novel *The Woman in the Dunes* is the aim of the present article. The author will firstly introduce the basic Existential maxims of Sartre's Theory aligned with a brief history of the development of the Existential thinking in the Western world. After this brief introduction, *The Woman in the Dunes* will be analyzed by focusing mainly on the protagonist's existential attempts to create meaning for his existence out of the meaninglessness he is trapped in, besides his existential struggle between his individual self and the society on one hand and the inner drives of his human nature on the other hand. The article ends with the protagonist's feelings of reconciliation and adjustment as he better understands the nature of life and the individual's ability to define and assert himself in his own surroundings.

## II. What Is Existentialism?

There are many definitions of "existentialism" and central to each definition is the assertion that "existentialism is a theory or statement about the nature of man's existence" (Barnes 2). The most influential contributor to this theory, the French philosopher Jean – Paul Sartre, defines existentialism as a doctrine "that does render human life possible; a doctrine, also which affirms that every truth and every action imply both an environment and human subjectivity" (24). Although the term is usually associated with Sartre, its history goes back to such philosophers as Soren Kierkegaard, and Friedrich Nietzsche who helped to construct existentialism.

The Danish Kierkegaard (1813-1855) is often called the father of existentialism. His belief in the subjectivity of truth, as opposed the traditional objectivity that dominated philosophy and religion, paved the way for the appreciation of man's comprehension of the world on the basis of an inward understanding of what might be a valid and meaningful life for him. Therefore, the individual must always be prepared to reject the accepted practices of society and find a personally accepted and valid way for his life. The result of this separation from others for the sake of a responsible self is loneliness and solitude. However, this Kierkegaardian loneliness of the self "is not the isolation of an ego locked into a consciousness with no content bit of its own ideas. [...]. It is rather the inwardness of a self, whose relation to itself is in any case mediated by its relationships with others, that is called upon to accept as its own responsibility for choosing how all those relationships will be structured" (Critchley and Schroeder 131).

Nietzsche's (1844-1900) influence on the development of existentialism came mainly through his conception of "the will to power", the fundamental motive of all life, which rejects any passive adjustment to "the pressures and necessities of the environment" but the life-affirming individual will for strength and power (Badey 555). He appreciated the love of freedom and life and encouraged the love of fate when one has lived life to the full and endeavored to reach the highest levels of human potentialities.

However, Jean – Paul Sartre (1905-1980) was the first philosopher who used the term "existentialism" for the philosophy that deals with human existence and his place and relationships in the world. Individualism, as the central claim of Sartre's theory emphasizes the fact that human doesn't have a "given nature" and instead can "freely choose his own goals"

(Olson 53). This is why for Sartre, between being (man's existence) and his being free, there is no difference: to exist, therefore, is to be free. He proposes that "existence precedes essence", which means that man would possess essence (would become what he is) only after coming to existence, and this is the point that man's freedom is definable, for man is free as he incessantly creates and invents himself. However, the awareness of this freedom and the experience of being responsible for one's own fate beget anguish. In return, the individual experiences anguish and therefore embarks on action.

The anguish of nothingness and the fear for lack of existence forces him to take the heavy responsibility of his actions on shoulders and actively step on the path of self recognition. I would experience anguish when I come to know that "decisive behavior which determines my future projects must emanate from a self which I have not yet become" (Hayin 17). This moral anguish of one's passivity and lack of awareness forces him to change his situation and choose to give meaning to his existence, but he then comes to experience despair, a Sartrean conclusion of existential perception. It is true that the responsibility of all decisions and actions is attributed to the individual and he is the only one who can influence his existence. But we should not forget that this autonomy belongs only to the realm of our personal lives and actions. The actions of others are beyond control and no one can admit that s/he is absolutely certain of other's behavior. With others, there are only probabilities, never certainty. Again, as in the case of existential anguish, despair acts as a motivating force to show us the possibilities that each of us might possess to plan our lives. When man desperately realizes that he cannot depend on others to fulfill the projects that he has chosen, he eventually reaches the existential recognition that one should only rely on himself to create meaning to his life and takes the possession of his proper position in the world. In short, this total involvement of an individual in certain actions and plans in regard to his life is what is referred to as existential freedom. The energy of this recognition of one's possibilities after experiencing anguish and despair "enables him to begin to exist" (Cuddon 295).

### **III. The Plight of Being Human: Individual as Opposed Society, Nature and Existence**

*Suna no Onna* (1962), translated in 1964 as *The Woman in the Dunes*, is a painful image of man's life in the modern world. It is the story of an entomologist, Niki Jumpei, obliged by strange circumstances to live with a young woman in a pit of sand at a seaside village. He soon understands that they are condemned everlastingly to shovel the sand which threatens to bury the village every day. The two are forced to live together in anguish while their existence is consumed with shoveling the ever-encroaching sand from the home. After seven-year absence from his workplace and life as a Japanese citizen, he is declared a missing person.

The novel dramatizes an existential insight towards the concept of "community" and man's relation with the imposed social codes and supposed modes of behavior. Human being, as entangled in the complicated social structure, has always been a matter of interest for Abe. He noted in his essay, "Journey through a Wormhole in the Earth" that he disgusted the social and cultural codes of law which try to "legitimize the walls surrounding nations by insisting on particularism of customs and habits" (Abe n.pag.). The village in the novel can be considered to be a symbol for a community with all of its intricate relations, terms and interactions. Part I of the book introduces the first discernible local condition in the village to which the entomologist protagonist – Niki – has traveled in order to find a new kind of insect that he has focused his studies and interest on. Sand, the natural living place of this insect, is in itself a controlling force, possessing an inherent potential for destruction and death: "Sand, which didn't even have a form

of its own – other than the mean  $\frac{1}{8}$  mm diameter. Yet not a single thing could stand against this shapeless, destructive power" (Abe 12). The villager's houses collapse because the sand piles up so heavily on the roofs.

Part II of the novel deals with the social norms and political severe laws of the village. It indicates the initially hidden fact that the villagers view themselves as slaves for a system which imposes a daily incessant labor on its people: "If we let the government office have their way we'd be lost in the sand while they're fiddling with their abacuses" (152). This manipulation of the villagers by a ruling group seems intolerable to the protagonist who bewilderingly points out the truth to the woman that "this means you exist only for the purpose of clearing away the sand, doesn't it?" (31). Here, Niki is the speaking mouth for the writer, who believes that the organizations cripple the individual and prevent him from personal growth and self-recognition. He felt that "the past binds man" and "not only the past and traditions, but society itself is structured to control human beings" (George 446).

In response to these local terms and obligations, the villagers take part in an endless fight against the destructive power of the sand and collectively preserve their village and its inhabitants. The idea that some houses (sandpits) possess a ladder while others lack, emphasizes the injustice of the system of power which has deprived a group of people from the freedom of climbing out of the pit and imposed on them an everlasting life of shoveling the sand:

And just to protect this pitiful bit of geography, more than ten households on the sea side had to submit a life of slavery. The slave holes were now situated in a line on the left road... It pained him just to look at them. In some places no rope ladders were looped around the bags, but more places had them than not. Not a few of the slaves, he supposed, and already lost all will to escape. (123)

It is obvious that the removal of the ladder means imprisoning the individuals in the cells of their sandpits and this, in turn, emphasizes the domineering role of the sociopolitical system in inflicting its limiting power on its subjects. This is how Abe illustrates an existentialist social criticism which deconstructs social conventions and practices. These are considered to be expressions of fear and ignorance. Sartre applied this kind of analysis to religion, society, morality, politics and technology. He believed that social system tends to deny individual choice and responsibility. The social rules and cultural codes eventually seek to "replace individual responsibility with abstract forces" over which human being has no control (Solomon 4).

What Niki thought was a trip that would allow him to escape temporarily from the inactivity of his routine life turns out to be a journey towards subjugation: "He had been lured by the beetle into a desert from which there was no escape – like some famished mouse" (38). He is subjected to a power that crushes him like a fly and denies him any legal right as an individual. On various occasions, he calmed himself by the idealistic illusion that this cruel treatment would certainly evoke reactions from every authority: "He lived under a constitutional government, and therefore it was natural that he should expect help" (67). According to existentialists, this credulous optimism results in nothing but a deep feeling of "despair" in the individual. Murray Miles interprets Sartrian "despair" as the result of our reliance on everything except ourselves: "The sense of despair that pervades our lives, even when we are unaware of it, reveals that we can count upon nothing but ourselves, on nothing more than what we ourselves do and on the knowledge of possibilities – not certainties! – without reliance on which human action, indeed human survival, would be impossible" (607).

Not only the ruling force exploits its people spiritually by taking hope away from them, it also manipulates them physically. The repeated use of animal imagery to describe Niki and the woman emphasizes the dehumanization and objectification of the individual under an authoritarian system. Besides, this idea is reinforced by the fact that characters in this novel are not referred to by their names, or better to say, do not possess any. Only the protagonist, Niki Jumpei, is known by his name initially, but after his entrapment in the sandpit is referred to simply as "the man". Ironically, Niki and others are reduced to instruments of labor. The task of saving the village restricts their identities to mere physical properties that do not show any differentiating attributes, by being nameless and wearing almost same clothes. Another manifestation of this physical exploitation is his being deprived of water to the extent that he is frightened to die by thirst: "He awoke. A hot, sticky glue was melting on the back of his tongue. His thirst had returned twofold. He wanted water. Sparkling, crystalline water, with silver spurs of air bubbles rising from the bottom of the glass. He was an empty water pipe in a deserted house, covered with spider webs and smeared with dust, gasping like a fish" (101-2).

However, if the village is considered to be a society ruled over by a totalitarian government, there will of course be evidences for the resistance as well. Niki views himself as a victim who has to resist the coercive power of his jailers and to rebel against their totalizing control.

One of his various forms of resistance is to refuse to be a useful workforce that shovels the sands. He pretends to be injured and forces the woman to take care of him and therefore the productivity aim, desired by the ruling force will not be fulfilled. Niki also resorts to escape his imprisonment. He tries to run away three times. Two of them are mere absurd attempts, but he is finally successful to leave the sandpit in the third time. He heads for the outskirts of the village, overpowered by a feeling of nervousness. The reason is the existence of a fire tower that overlooks the village, with a man watching with binoculars the whole place, even within the sandpits. He can't tell whether he is being watched by the watchman from the fire tower. The tower is the symbol of the government's complete surveillance over the citizens. It is ironic that the people in the sandpit can at every desired moment see the tower (so there is constantly a controlling eye over them). At the same time, they never know whether they are being observed at any moment, because no one has ever entered the tower and does not know its function. This is exactly the reason for Niki's nervousness during his third and actually unsuccessful escape. The punishment for this attempt crushes his soul.

The villagers guide him towards moving sands where he is about to be buried in the bottom of the earth: "Sinking... Sinking... Soon he would be up his waist... what in God's name could he do? [...] He wanted to go on living under any circumstances, even if his life had no more individuality that a pea in a pod" (140). They push him to believe that there is no one to witness his death when in fact they have been watching him being slowly surrounded by the sands. They hear his animal-like desperate cry for help that indicates his desire to live under any condition. As they rescue him, "his dreams, desperation, shame, concern with appearances – all were buried under the sand. ...Now, he was nothing more than a punching bag to be knocked around" (141). Niki is rescued, being humiliated and crushed in the most brutal way. What he thought was the road to freedom turns out to be the road to annihilation.

Community, with all the rules and codes, is not the only barrier against Niki's desire to acquire freedom and full individuality. The other obstacle which he should overcome in order to attain self recognition does not exist in the external world of society but is rooted within the individual. It is Niki's instinctual drives of his own nature which existentialists consider as an

impediment against subjectivity. Since existentialism is the philosophy with the main focus on human existence, with its all aspects of anxiety, fear, despair, fleshliness and spirituality, it is unavoidable to expect that it also deals with human natural impulses, mainly sexuality. Sartre sees that sexual love in human is, more than a desire for physical release. "The sexual attitude is a primary behavior towards the other" (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 406). He states that the reason behind many of our relationships is not – as it is usually assumed – attraction to other people, but rather how those people make us feel about ourselves by how they look at us. This is a great impediment against the individuals' experience of their subjectivity because they refer to other's "look" to know themselves, rather than relying on themselves.

The "look", Sartre explains, is the basis for sexual desire. "Caught in the gaze of the other, one experiences one's transcendence transcended. In this case, the experience of sexual embodiment is one wherein one utilizes the concepts of the other to understand one's own self. While body is necessary for realization of subjectivity, the experience one may have of the body in this way might limit and thwart some other aspects" (Dreyfus and Wrathall 491).

The woman in the novel is the Sartrean other with whom the protagonist has the most conflicts. She is understood via Niki's description of her body, clothes and her role in their relationship. Among other instances of describing his imprisonment through animal imagery, he extends this imagery to his relation with the woman: "You through I'd spring at once if a woman was there, like some dog or cat" (59). And "Her shoulders drooped, but she made no further attempt to move; she was like a dejected, unjustly abused puppy" (60).

When Niki arrives at the house at night fall, he is "disarmed" by the woman's initially coquettish ways, just as earlier in the day he was "completely captivated by the "mercilessly tantalizing" (110) flight of a yellow-legged beetle which is famous for its use of confusing flight pattern to seduce small animals into the desert where they die for the beetle to consume. While Niki is dreaming of a simple meal with this simple country woman at the first moments of their encounter, she is described by her "undeniable charm" and "transparent emotion" (20). However, as the woman declares that her husband and children have been buried in sand, the man finds the woman's manner seductive, without any traces of remorse for her family's death, but possessing an excitement that aroused him. From now on, as the sexual attraction dominates their relationship, the woman is described purely physically and mainly through nonromantic and real imageries: "She got down on all fours and stretched on her arm. Laughing, she snapped the lamp wick with her finger [...]. In the same posture she gazed at the flame, smiling that unnatural smile. He realized that it was doubtless deliberately done to show off her dimple, and unconsciously his body stiffened" (24).

When the desires of instinct appear, the characters are depicted within the framework of fleshliness and physicality. Over his first day of stay in the woman's house, he finds that she sleeps nakedly to avoid the sweat of sand. The scene is described in a vulgar and non-humanly manner: "The sight of her naked back was indecent and animal-like. She looked as though she could be flipped over just by bringing his hand up her crotch" (41). There are frequent references by the protagonist to sexuality and various concepts related to it. "They had been a man who watched himself experiencing and a woman who watched herself experiencing, they had been a woman who watched a man watching himself and a man watching a woman watching herself... all reflected in counter-mirrors... the limitless consciousness of the sexual act" (190). Compare the above lines with Sartre's definition of sexual experience that has "double reciprocal incarnation" – a form of mutual awareness – at its heart: "I make myself flesh in order to impel the other to realize for herself and for me her own flesh, and my caresses cause my flesh to be

born for me in so far as it is for the other flesh causing her to be born as flesh.[...] And so possession truly appears as a double reciprocal incarnation" (Sartre *Being Nothingness* 391).

This is the moment when experiencing the subjectivity for each side becomes equally impossible, because they cannot escape the control of the other's look to which they feel enslaved and this leads to the loss of freedom for both. In one word, such a relation – whether it is called love or sexual intercourse – is doomed to fail, as far as it is in reality the war between freedoms, and the more one finds himself entangled in such circumstances, the more he will fall far from his real, independent self.

After three months of detention, Niki claims his rights as a prisoner. He asks to climb up the walls of the sand pit and have a period of exercise under their supervision. The villagers give in to his request on the condition that he allows them to watch him make love to the woman from the top of the cliff. Full of the desire for freedom, he publically throws his body over the woman, and thus submits to the savage suggestion of public rape: "There was no need to distinguish between watcher and watched. There might still be some differences between them, but this little ceremony would be enough to make it vanish" (158). Although he has expressed his hatred towards his cruel oppressors very frequently, he now finds himself one with them. By serving their order, he has become integrated into their community: "He could feel the breathless villagers looking down from the top of the cliff, so clearly they could have been himself. They were part of him; their viscid drooling saliva was his own desire. In his mind he was the executioner's representative, rather than the victim" (159). What seemed to be a door to his temporary freedom was a mirage leading to his further enslavement. The way to freedom passes through self completion, and this is impossible when one does not overcome the instinctual drives of his nature. Sartre is against the idea of human being driven by any force – specifically animal instincts and passions – and insists on cutting the strings of dependency by asserting the agency of the individuals to choose their own fate. The force of community and the submission to natural instincts denies Niki his individual freedom and self recognition. However, another very significant impediment which threatens the protagonist's desire for freedom roots neither in the external world of social rules, nor within his human nature, but it is a flaw within life itself. The futility of existence, the repetitive patterns of daily life and the inherent hopelessness that this absurdity brings about prevent the individual to take action and change the situation. This philosophical plight of existence is the backdrop against which all the events of the story happen. The clearest picture of the futility of human life is given in the following rather long extract, while Niki views the whole village during the short experience of freedom after his unsuccessful attempt to escape:

He could easily understand how it was possible to live such a life. There were kitchens, there were stoves with fires burning in them, there were apple crates, in place of desks, piled full of books, there were kitchens, there were sunken hearths, there were lamps, there were stoves with fire burning in them, there were torn shoji, there were sooty ceilings, there were kitchens, there were clocks that were running and clocks that weren't, there were blaring radios and broken radios, there were kitchens and stoves with fires in them... And in the midst of them all were scattered hundred-yen pieces, domestic animals, children, sex, promissory notes, adultery, incense burners, and... It goes on, terrifyingly repetitive. One could not do without repetition in life, like the beating of the heart, but it was also true that the beating of the heart was not all there was to life. (123)



The life is repetitive and this is saddening. But more tragic than that is the people's indifference towards it. No one tries to create a new meaning for this meaninglessness and even when there is the chance of freedom through a ladder left in some houses, there is no attempt and this brings pain to Niki who is forced to admit that "Not a few of the slaves" (123) live here.

The only thing the people of this small community think of is shoveling the sand to survive. They all share an existence that is consumed with shoveling the ever-encroaching sand from their homes. The scene reminds every reader of the tragic life of Sisyphus who was condemned by gods to ceaselessly roll a rock to the top of a mountain "only to see it roll back again as it reached the crest" (Cotterell and Storm 83). At the very end of each long journey to the top of the hill, Sisyphus watched the stone rush down in a few moments towards that lower world from where he had to push it up again towards the summit. Gods had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor. The laborers of the sandpits practice the same absurd toil.

Niki, the protagonist, initially refuses to submit to such a meaningless life. He believes that there should be a deeper idea in existence than shoveling the sand: "It really is important to clear away the sand. But that's a means, not a goal. Your goal is to protect your life from the sand, isn't it? [...] You take advantage of the sand, you follow it, you don't run against it. In short, you've got to try to make a complete change in your thinking" (106). He believes that human is created to do more serious things in life and "even a monkey could shovel up the sand if it just had a little practice" (108). Nevertheless, the passivity and paralysis of the sand dwellers does not seem to be curable because they are not actually conscious of it at all. He decides to escape and to defeat this absurdity by running away from its fatal hands. However, he is unaware of the fact that freedom is gained in the cost of losing the self. The new free identity is built on the ruins of the old restricted self and Niki has to experience anguish, dread and despair to reach the most desired freedom.

Sartre believes that the awareness of freedom constitutes anguish. This does not mean that anguish is a proof of freedom, but that freedom is known by our experience of it. "Now, it is in anguish that man attains consciousness of liberty, or, if you will, anguish is the mode of being of liberty as consciousness of being free" (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 66). When Niki understands that the lights of the highway towards which he has directed his escape are vanished, the idea of returning unknowingly to the same place and losing the proper way frightens him: "A feeling of apprehension paralyzed his legs" (132). When the villagers find him and the alarm bell starts ringing, "at every sound of the bell his heart jumped a beat" (136). The anxiety and fear leads to a saddening helplessness when he finds himself trapped in moving sand in danger of being buried in it. It's a sad fate because the villagers pushed him to believe in the success of his escape while in fact were guiding him towards the moving sand. His happiness of success was the fake and illusory happiness of moving freely within a set of boundaries. In *The Concept of Dread*, Kierkegaard wrote,

If a man were a beast or an angel, he would not be able to dread. Since he is in synthesis he can be in dread and the greater the dread, the greater the man. [...] Dread is the possibility of freedom. Only this dread is by the aid of faith absolutely educative, laying bare as it does all finite aims and discovering all their deceptions.... (139)

Although the "faith" to which Kierkegaard referred was a Christian faith, it is a faith in the potential of liberation that drives Abe's protagonist in this novel. "How dark it was. The whole world closed its eyes and stopped its ears. No one would even turn around to look at his

death spasms. Fear convulsed his throat and suddenly burst out" (140). When there seems to him that no hope for rescue has remained, he gives up and submits to his fear. His individuality being broken into pieces, he begins an unrestrained sobbing and asks help from his oppressors: "He submitted to his fear with the horrible feeling that all was lost. There was no one to see him, it made no difference" (140) and later on he asserts that "what [is] the use of individuality when one [is] on the point of death?" (140). Despair, in Sartrean terminology, arises because we only have power to change things that are within our power to change and there is a lot we cannot change. We despair because we can never have full control of the future. The experience of despair, as discussed by Sartre, points us to an existential conclusion: "Man is nothing else than his plan" (Marino 355). As the moon rises and the sky grows lighter, Niki is finally rescued, while inertly he is destroyed. "His dreams, desperation, shame, concern with appearances – all were buried under the sand" (141).

Niki had to experience the tyranny of the totalitarian rulers, the tempting impulses of his strong instincts and beyond all, his emotional alienation and existential despair in the futile existence of a repetitive life to be able to create a meaning for his self out of all the surrounding meaninglessness. He is an existential hero, because he is finally successful to redefine himself within the same context that he is trapped in.

#### **IV. The Quest for Identity: Selfhood Regained in the Sandpit**

In Niki's last attempt to recapture his freedom, he invents a small contraption made of a wooden bucket buried in a deep hole in the sand in order to hunt crows in the empty space behind the house. He hopes that somebody will one day discover the letter, written and fasten to the leg of the captured crow, and come to rescue him. One day, while checking the bait, he discovers that pure water is collected at the bottom of the leaking bucket. Because of the capillary action of the sand, surface evaporation has been acting as a kind of pump, drawing up the subsurface water. It is clear that the discovery of water is a symbol for Niki's empowerment.

As soon as he discovers water in the sand, he breaks out of his prison mentally: "The fact that he was still just as much at the bottom of the hole as ever had not changed, but he felt quite as if he had climbed to the top of a high tower" (162). He is psychologically empowered when he feels that possessing water means his independence from the villagers whose very current punishment for those who refuse to labor, is cutting off their share of water. The villagers can no longer subject him to the fear of death. This is a final point for their power over his life. From now on, he will be the master of his own life and can have a clearer view of his fate.

At the social level, the discovery of the water in the sands causes Niki to feel free from the oppression of the ruling force. But he is overwhelmed by an inner desire to tell someone about the water trap, as Coleridge's "ancient mariner" who had to talk about his experience to someone to be calm: "And if he wanted to talk about it, there wouldn't be better listeners than the villagers. He would end up telling someone – if not today, then tomorrow" (165).

The existentialism of Sartre appreciates that individual whose commitment and responsibility goes beyond the self liberation and involves all mankind. The way to full freedom of the individual passes through the freedom of others. Niki's need to communicate with the villagers reveals a concern for their fate and an effort to change their monotonous existence. On the other hand, Niki's discovery also empowers his mind philosophically, because he tries to think of a more efficient device for storing water. He involves himself in a hardworking attempt

to change his own and others' lives. His work, as opposed the villager's labor, is productive and redefines his personality and reveals his inner potentialities.

The interesting point is that this discovery (both water and his self) has happened in sand, the same material that was considered as the force of his subjugation, before. Niki comes to discover that whereas his previous vision of sand was a source of misery, the new one is a source of liberation, self recognition and rebirth: "The change in the sand corresponded to a change in himself. Perhaps, along with the water in the sand, he had found a new self" (162-3).

William Currie explains that sand stands for "the shifting reality in which the hero must come to terms with himself and his surroundings, find roots for existence and discover who he really is" (1-2). In other words, sand can be a central image for the life itself. It has a dual nature. On the one hand, it can be interpreted as the symbol for the infinite futility of existence in which Niki is trapped and has nothing to do beyond bearing his enslavement by it. On the other hand, sand can be taken as a symbol for limitless potentialities of the individual, who discovers water – a hidden potential of sand – and in fact extracts the meaning out of the meaninglessness.

After Niki's discovery that sand is an immense water pump, events move towards an unexpected point. He grows close to the woman, helps with her craftwork and shares her desire of buying a radio. Instead of presenting animal-like sexual experiences, it is shown that the woman is pregnant, itself a symbol for fertility and a hope to pass the inherent barrenness of lives. More important than all, Niki does not try to leave the village when the villagers leave the rope ladder by which the woman is carried outside for medical treatment. The chance that Niki has waited for through these years is finally at hand. But he no longer feels a compelling need to return to his former life. Why should he still think of leaving when the life in the dunes is the source of his liberation and self recognition? He has experienced a self renewal. Now, he feels himself an active member of the community – a role he had never experienced in his previous life in city – and feels himself responsible for the welfare and freedom of others. He now feels the Sartrean responsibility as the very primary result of choice. Niki is enjoying this possibility to choose: "On the two-way ticket he held in his hand now, the destination and time of departure were blanks for him to fill in as he wished" (165). This is how the man of the dunes puts off "his escape until sometime after that" (165).

## V. Conclusion

Existentialism, the philosophical movement, with its main focus on the experiences of the individual, is the subject of interest for the modern Japanese writer kobo Abe in his novel *The Woman in the Dunes*. Niki Jumpei, the protagonist, feels himself enslaved by the forces of society, desires of his own nature and the inherent futility of the repetitive life. After various attempts of resistance and rebel which were all doomed to fail, he reaches the recognition that he can be saved if he tries to create a meaning for his absurd life. The way to freedom passes from within the individual's existence, and one should not search it outside. Despite its apparent bleakness, Abe's message is in fact at the heart of optimism: liberation is possible and there is yet a way out of the sand pit of the social order, natural determinism and philosophic futility that leaves us all conscious individuals who move towards the summit of individuality and subjectivity.

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