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KAFKAESQUE ELEMENTS IN KOBO ABE'S *THE WOMAN IN THE DUNES*

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ABSTRACT

This research paper takes a detailed look at the Kafkaesque elements employed by Kobo Abe in his novel *The Woman in the Dunes*. It also brings to light the love which Kobo Abe has for Franz Kafka by bringing in all the aspects that Kafka has used in his novels that catapulted him to fame.

Key Words: Franz Kafka, Surrealism, Grotesque Exaggeration, Existentialism, Kafkaesque elements.

Without the threat of punishment there is no joy in flight.

— Kobo Abe

Franz Kafka

Franz Kafka (3 July 1883 – 3 June 1924) was a German-speaking Bohemian Jewish novelist and short story writer, widely regarded as one of the major figures of 20th-century literature. His work, which fuses elements of realism and the fantastic,[3] typically features isolated protagonists faced by bizarre or surrealistic predicaments and incomprehensible social-bureaucratic powers, and has been interpreted as exploring themes of alienation, existential anxiety, guilt, and absurdity.

Kobo Abe

Kōbō Abe (Abe Kōbō), pseudonym of Kimifusa Abe (Abe Kimifusa, born on March 7, 1924), was a Japanese writer, playwright, photographer and inventor. Abe has been often compared to Franz Kafka and Alberto Moravia for his modernist sensibilities and his surreal, often nightmarish explorations of individuals in contemporary society.

The meeting point between Franz Kafka and Kobo Abe

Franz Kafka's works have been celebrated all over the world for their brilliance and uniqueness which is sorely missed in the work of other writers. Be it the ending or the objective style of narration, or its surreal setting, Kafka has created a style of his own and has set the trend for the people to follow. It is of no doubt that he has a huge following, mainly in the literary circuit as one can see a plethora of writers who are inspired by his works and have tried to include elements which gave prominence to his works.

Kobo Abe, who has been a voracious reader, took a liking for the works of Franz Kafka along with some other literary bigwigs. He has shown glimpses of Kafka's inimitable style in his works. His most famous novel *The Woman in the Dunes* is seen as a Kafkaesque novel for its surrealist setting. His work, *The Crime of S. Karma* bears a striking resemblance to Franz Kafka's *The Trial*. Likewise, many of Kobo Abe's works bore some

elements which were inspired by Kafka's. The following will be a list of Kafkaesque elements which are found in the novel *The Woman in the Dunes*, written by Kobo Abe.

Objective Style

"One day in August a man disappeared. He had simply set out for the seashore on a holiday, scarcely half a day away by train, and nothing more was ever heard of him. Investigation by the police and inquiries in the newspapers had both proved fruitless" (3), Kobo Abe starts the novel by saying so.

The opening lines of the novel cuts out all the needless description and avoids the use of ornamental language. He puts the situation on top rather than placing the individual on a pedestal. The human situation is more important to him, and in no time he takes the readers into crisis. This highly objective style of his can be attributed to Kafka's works *The Trial* and *The Castle* which strikes the readers with its objectivity right from the beginning. The works are detached, so are the character's emotions. Kobo Abe stressed only on complex and important details in his works. His days as a medical practitioner had a huge role to play in his knack of dissection of perspectives with effortless ease. The opening lines are devoid of any exaggeration and they function as a vehicle which gives a sense of what is going on.

Two Different Worlds

Two different worlds, the world outside and the world he is stuck into (pit). The worlds are differentiated by their environment, people, lifestyle and many more. The author presents two worlds, the world of city where there is access to everything, and life at the city is safe and easy, and the world of village which is constantly under threat is shown in parallel.

"After a time there were no more houses, only straggling clumps of pine. Then the soil changed to a fine sand that clung to his feet. Now and again clumps of dry grass cast shadows in hollows in the sand. As if by mistake, there was occasionally a meager plot of eggplants, the size of a straw mat. But of human shadows there was not a trace. The sea, toward which he was headed, lay beyond" (7), says the narrator.

These lines sketch the world which NikiJumpei enters. He has been living in the city, and the fast paced life of city goes sorely missing in this world. He slowly enters into the new world of village which is in contrast with the environment which he had experienced in the city. No trace of human are to be found, the space is open and it is filled with sand. The city will be filled with skyscrapers and people would be cramping for room to walk, but there is no sight of house in this place.

"The younger ones don't settle down very well, that's why. I suppose it's because in town the pay is good, and then the movies, and restaurants, and stores are open every day" (118), says the woman.

The difference between the two worlds – village and city – is evident through the lines spoken by the woman. The lifestyle and the environment varies to a large extent, and the younger ones have a liking particularly to city life as it provides them a great environment not just in terms of work and pay, but also gives them an ambience that could keep them entertained.

"Maybe, but what tight buttocks! You couldn't compare them to the frustrated bags of bones you picked up in the streets" (140), says the narrator.

NikiJumpei compares the women from the two worlds, one from the city and the other from the village. The woman from the village is full and has all the necessary characteristic features that would make her appear a woman. In contrast the woman in the city is just a bag of bones. The lines bring out how the city women are losing out on their health by maintaining strict diet patterns and visibly have become size zero. The women in the village do all the chores and maintain a stable health which is resembled in their look.

"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 fires 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, souvenir photos, and... It goes on, terrifyingly repetitive" (176) says the narrator.

The lines explain in detail how the life in the hole is like. It is highly repetitive, but there is still life in it. It goes on like just another normal life. The place may not have all the basic amenities, but it still has something

to give for the people who live in there. Life in the hole is monotonous and lacks difference that is offered by the outside world. Everyone who lived in the hole either learnt to live with what they had or they never expected anything in life. Even in that highly repetitive life in the hole, the people were engaged with their daily chores and kept their private lives running.

"As he looked up at the rim of the hole, faintly limned in the moonlight, he mused that this searing feeling of his was perhaps jealousy. Maybe it was a jealousy of all things that presented a form outside the hole: streets, trolley cars, traffic signals at intersections, advertisements on telephone poles, the corpse of a cat, the drugstore where they sold cigarettes" (226-227), says the narrator.

The narrator tries to describe the inner psyche of NikiJumpei who longs to get out of the hole where he has been kept in bondage by the villagers. He wants to enjoy the outside world, but he is lying in the hole from which everything – advertisements on telephone poles, traffic signals at interjections, trolley cars, and streets – is a distant reality. He is jealous of the outside world which is full of happenings, whereas in the hole there is only monotony.

Ending

"There was no particular need to hurry about escaping. 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. In addition, he realized that he was bursting with a desire to talk to someone about the water trap. And if he wanted to talk about it, there wouldn't be better listeners than the villagers. He would end by telling someone—if not today, then tomorrow" (239), says the narrator.

The protagonist who has been trying to escape from the hole has a change of heart when he can easily escape from the village. He has got the ladder that he has been wishing to have. He thinks that he can leave whenever he wants as he has everything with him that could help him to escape from the hole. But now he has a perpetual longing to tell about his discovery – the water trap – to the villagers. "He might as well put off his escape until sometime after that" (239), adds the narrator. The change in the protagonist is mainly due to his discovery of water, which would prove fruitful for the villagers.

Surreal Setting

"The slope suddenly steepened. It must have been at least sixty-five feet down to the tops of the houses. What in heaven's name could it be like to live there? he thought in amazement, peering down into one of the holes" (9), says the narrator.

The landscape of the village surprises NikiJumpei and he couldn't just believe his eyes. The house lies deep inside a hole. It is pitch dark inside the hole while it is terribly hot outside. It must be almost 40 feet to reach the surface from the top of the house. He was deeply amazed at what it could be like to live in the hole. "Either way, it was a disturbing and unsettling landscape" (10), adds the narrator.

"Yes. The sand is easier to work with at night because it's damp. When the sand is dry," she said, looking up toward the sky, "you never know when or where it will come crashing down" (35), said the woman.

The woman explains how dangerous the life in the village is, with the constant threat of sand seeping in constantly. One can never guess when the sand will bury them altogether. With the woman's words one can see the villagers are living their life off the edge. The people continue to shovel, which the sand continues to fall endlessly. The sand is never going to stop seeping, nor the people going to stop their shoveling.

Meaninglessness

The process of shoveling the sand is a Sisyphean task which is similar to the infernal punishment given to Sisyphus. The man getting stuck into the hole and shoveling lacks meaning, like the meaninglessness of life. It is for no fault of his he has to suffer. He merely wanted to escape the city life. He is a prisoner to the absurdities of life.

The woman, on the other hand says that she had lost her husband and daughter to a sandstorm. It is quite difficult to believe her words as she cannot even recall the place where they got buried. The life of a martyr which she leads to save the villagers is highly cinematic.

Hopeless Hope

"I don't want to die like a beggar!" (220), says the man in one of his reveries.

The entomologist (NikiJumpei) who gets stuck in the hole is in a state from which he cannot escape. The villagers are in no mood to let him go. He has to no other go but to keep shoveling. He equates his position to the position of a dog which is caged when he says, "Even a dog'll go mad if you keep it shut up in a cage"(89). He has no way to escape as the rope ladder has been taken away. In spite of his tough position, he doesn't want to give as he says that he won't end up and die like a beggar.

Grotesque Exaggeration

"The beauty of sand, in other words, belonged to death. It was the beauty of death that ran through the magnificence of its ruins and its great power of destruction" (183), says the narrator.

The sand, in the above lines has been equated to the level of an object of destruction. It has been portrayed as something which possess great power. The beauty, as the narrator is the ability of the sand to cause destruction. There is a profound silence in the sands, but it can cause ruins on a huge scale. This exaggeration and equating sand to death is quite odd to the readers.

Parable

AbeKobo's most famous work *The Woman in the Dunes* is no doubt a parable, but a parable which tries to say what? Is it a parable of a person in which he receives an eternal punishment of shoveling the sand, or it is a case of him being saved from the city's life?

"I used to keep a worthless mongrel at my boardinghouse. He had a terribly thick coat that scarcely shed even in summer. He was such a sorry sight that I finally decided to cut his hair. But just as I was about to throw away the hair that had been cut off, the dog—I wonder what could have been going on in his mind?—suddenly let out a pitiful howl, took a bunch of hair in his mouth, and ran into his house. He probably felt that the hair was a part of his own body and he didn't want to be separated from it" (65), said the man.

The above lines describe the story of a mongrel which directly refers to the woman. The woman has lost her family to a sandstorm and refuses to leave the hole as she feels that she belongs there. She feels complete when she is in the hole and doesn't even go out for a breath of fresh air. The mongrel feels that the hair which was cut from its body is a part of it, and it creates a scene as if it has lost its life.

"It's a story I read some place... Leaving home is all the fashion now. I thought it was because of bad living conditions, but that doesn't seem to be the only reason. They mentioned a middle-class farm family that had recently added land to its holdings, bought machinery, and was doing quite well, when the eldest son suddenly left home. He was a quiet, hard-working young man, and his parents were completely puzzled; they didn't know why. In country villages you have social obligations and reputation to think of, so there really must have been a reason for the heir of the family to have left home..." (187-188), says the narrator.

The narrator shares the story of a young man who wants to escape from the meaningless labor he is put into. He belongs to a family of farmers who are doing a good job with the production, and in want of giving better output they include machinery and added lands. The addition of materials does nothing but increase the amount of job to be done. He isn't lazy to do those works but thought everything that goes around him is so absurd and leaves his home.

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