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No escape

Is Kobo Abe's strange, bleak novel *The Woman in the Dunes*, about a man imprisoned in a pit of sand, a parable of damnation or salvation? Both, argues David Mitchell. It is a metaphor for the human predicament

David Mitchell

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Kobo Abe's novel *The Woman in the Dunes* appeared in 1962, to spontaneous acclaim, was translated into 20 languages and adapted for a Cannes festival award-winning film directed by Hiroshi Teshigahara and scored by Toru Takemitsu. Each of the seven subsequent novels that Abe wrote before his death, aged 68, in 1993 earned him plaudits as a writer of the avant-garde and sales of over 100,000 in Japan alone.

That Kobo Abe had survived his early 20s to mature into one of his country's most venerated writers was down to some lucky throws of the dice. When poor grades at Tokyo University Medical School jeopardised his draft exemption, he forged a certificate stating he had tuberculosis to avoid an all-too-probable death at the front. The ploy worked, and Abe was able to return to his childhood home of Mukden (Shen-yang), Manchuria, in 1944, where an epidemic killed his father, a doctor, the following year. Abe survived the anarchic collapse of the de facto Japanese colony and was repatriated in 1946.

Back in the Tokyo of General MacArthur, Abe led a hand-to-mouth existence as a street vendor, selling vegetables and charcoal to support himself and his wife, Machiko, a fine line-artist whose drawings illustrate his novels. Abe's literary name was established in 1951, when a collection of short stories won the 25th Akutagawa prize, Japan's most prestigious award, though a further decade would pass before the publication of *The Woman in the Dunes* (*Suna no onna*) ushered in some measure of that security which he so rarely extended to his fictional characters.

In Abe's novels, plot and character are usually subservient to idea and symbol. This makes *The Woman in the Dunes* something of an anomaly. Its plot is devious, addictive yet straightforward. An amateur entomologist arrives in a remote area of sand dunes with hopes of identifying a type of sand beetle. Night falls and the villagers offer him shelter in a ramshackle house at the bottom of a funnel-shaped pit of sand. Descent is possible only by means of a rope ladder. The occupant of the house, a young woman, spends most of the night shovelling sand into buckets, which are then raised by the villagers: her house is one of a bulwark that prevents the village being swallowed by the advancing sand dunes. When he awakes, the man finds the rope ladder is gone. His attempts to climb out of the pit repeatedly fail, and he comes to realise, first with incredulity, then outrage, then fear, that he is now a conscript in this Sisyphean labour. Nor is he the first outsider to be press-ganged into the battle against the encroaching dunes: but the villagers allow inadequate specimens to die, rather than risk detection by the distant authorities.

The novel pits the man's will to escape this sun-fried nightmare against the villagers' will to keep him where he is, and it is never less than compulsive. Abe populated his novels with loners, doctors, loner-doctors, maudlin scientists and shifty vagrants who tend to be delineated more by what they think or the ideas they symbolise than by a fleshing out of personal histories. He names his characters with apparent reluctance. In *The Woman in the Dunes* the protagonist's name - Niki Jumpei - is revealed on a missing persons form filed by his mother, but for the most part he is simply "the man". Likewise, the eponymous woman is simply "the woman". This lends its subjects an archetypal quality and an independence from Japanese culture, but risks making the characters seem sterile, abstract and difficult to empathise with. *The Woman in the Dunes*, however, manages to avoid this. Its protagonist could by no means be described as endearing, but he is plausible enough for the reader to believe in and care about.

Niki Jumpei was born in 1924, the same year as his creator, and works as a mildly misanthropic teacher at a boys' school. When he describes his colleagues' spiritual ossification, he seems, in fact, to be describing his own. Also left behind in the real world is a congealing relationship with a lover referred to, Abe-esquely, as "the other woman". Before the man left for his vacation, he addressed an unsent letter to her, hinting at depression and a sulky desire to vanish from the world, and left it on his desk. It is this letter that precludes a police investigation into Niki Jumpei's disappearance.

His philosophical outlook allows him to articulate the book's psycho-social and existential themes, and his scientific eye, like Abe's own, is keen enough to engineer escape plans and be informed about the minerology of sand. For all his pomposity, the man tries to be decent.

The woman was born in the village and, presumably, has never left it. She says her husband and child were killed in a sand avalanche, but is unable to locate their burial place. Whether this statement is true, a deception or one of Abe's murkier symbols is never really settled. For all the monotony of her existence, the woman is a multilayered character. It is one role of her unwilling house guest to unpeel these layers for the reader. The man first sees her as an object of contempt: why doesn't she fight the villagers' tyranny? Later, the contempt is diluted to pity. She doesn't fight her tyranny because she doesn't know what freedom is; she doesn't even feel the chafe of its absence.

Later, when the man takes the woman hostage in a bid to secure his release, she endures the indignity with far more grace than her captor has hitherto shown: she is more like a patient mother waiting for a child's tantrum to pass. When sexuality enters their relationship the woman partakes eagerly, but it is not romantic sex. The organ that governs gender relations in Abe's loveless fictional landscapes is rarely the heart. But on leaving the pit of sand for what he believes is the final time, Niki Jumpei feels a flush of magnanimity for the woman, and resolves to send her a radio on his return to the real world.

Things fail to go as planned, and the woman reveals a more chilling face. She tells the man how the village union sells sand illegally to a concrete manufacturer. The man fulminates that this would endanger the lives of all those dependent on dams not bursting and bridges not collapsing. The woman replies, accusingly, "Why should we worry what happens to other people?" A Japanese reader of *The Woman in the Dunes* is invited to assume that the villagers are burakumin, the little-discussed caste of untouchables historically obliged to work in "unclean" trades such as butchery, tanning or sewage removal and live where nobody else wanted to, and who were considered little better than animals. The villagers thus have just cause to distrust - to despise - a mainstream society that has always oppressed them.

The novel is not an apologia for the burakumin, but it does suggest that the man is trapped in a class war - or caste war - unacknowledged by society at large, yet taken for granted by the burakumin. This flash of relativism challenges the man's conviction that he is the innocent victim and the villagers the guilty perpetrators.

Months go by, and the man and woman evolve a working accommodation that one might find in an unsatisfactory but indissoluble marriage. They obtain piece-work to save money and buy a radio. Does love, of a sort, take root in their confinement? The question is a key one: on its answer, in part, hinges the issue of whether this is a book about a damnation or a salvation. For Timothy Iles, author of an analysis in English of Abe's work, the man's reaction to the reappearance of the rope ladder in the final scene is as bleak as the conclusion of 1984: an individual's will to freedom has been crushed, and with it, his soul. The woman's extra-uterine pregnancy is, for Iles, a symbol of sterility and desolation. But might it not also be true that the man hesitates to leave his prison because he feels a glimmer of belonging - of tenderness, even - which he never experienced in the days when he was "free"?

Abe is an accomplished stylist. He was apt to frame his novels in "found" notebooks or other written artefacts, and *The Woman in the Dunes* closes with the missing persons report mentioned on its first page. It includes a page or two of its protagonist's jottings to himself; a dream, a hallucinatory flashback here and there, but the structure is simple and linear. The language, in E Dale Saunders' prudent and still crisp 1964 translation, has the clarity of a parable. Abe's first publication in 1947 was a privately mimeographed book entitled *Poems of an Unknown Poet* (Mumei Shishu), and the poet's eye - and discretion - informs Abe's use of imagery in his novels: "the sun was boiling mercury"; "it was like trying to build a house in the sea by brushing the water aside".

A further point of stylistic interest in many of Abe's novels is the sparseness both of their casts and their locations. Most of *The Woman in the Dunes* occurs either inside or immediately outside the woman's house, almost as if it were conceived for the theatre. Abe also enjoyed an international reputation as a playwright, and Abe the Stylist was informed by Abe the Stage Manager as well as Abe the Poet.

For this reader, the novel flaunts its symbolic and literal point and counter-point in its title. The woman is the animate; the mortal; the flesh; the impetus for sex; consolation in the cell of the unendurable. The dunes are the inanimate; the eternal; what confines us; the unendurable itself. Sand permeates the novel like a third major character. Sand gets in the food, the house, in clothes, into clocks. It is while brushing sand off each other's bodies that the man and the woman are ushered into sex. The sand of these dunes, laden with dampness, does not preserve but rots everything it touches: wood, leather, fabric, "morality". Like time itself, "Sand not only flows, but this very flow is the sand". To combat its voracity is what requires hapless men to be held captive in the first place. Sand is the prison: literally, symbolically; and not just for the man. We, too, are down in this burning sandpit. We, too, must spend a lifetime doing a job as meaningless (to the universe at large, if not to ourselves) as shovelling never-ending deposits of sand into buckets, getting nothing for our pains but the barest essentials. As we read about the man's predicament, existentially speaking, we are reading about our own.

Maybe, maybe, maybe. Buddhism is predicated on the impermanence of all things, including Buddhism. In a not dissimilar way, the meditations on freedom, captivity, the transient and the immutable in *The Woman in the Dunes* invite, and allow for, misinterpretations - which might be another word for "reinterpretations". Even the novel's opening epigram, "Without the threat of punishment there is no joy in flight", has fuzzy edges: is this an oppressor's justification or a would-be fugitive's consolation?

While working on this novel Abe was expelled from the Japanese Communist party for “Trotskyite deviation”, and it is possible that in this novel the writer wished to eschew moral absolutes and certainties in order to suggest that no dogma, interpretation and no authorial intention is immune to the transforming effects of the future, as it inches towards us like a sea of dunes.

• The Woman in the Dunes and The Face of Another by Kobo Abe are reissued by Penguin Classics this month. To order a copy of The Woman in the Dunes for £8.99 with free UK p&p call Guardian book service on 0870 836 0875. The DVD is rereleased by BFI Video Publishing (£19.99).

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