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THE SISYPHEAN LIFE AS IN KOBO ABE'S *THE WOMAN IN THE DUNES*

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ABSTRACT

This research paper takes a look at human monotony in general and focuses particularly on the monotony portrayed in the novel *The Woman in the Dunes*, and it does a detailed research on how the characters in the novel respond and take effective measures to counter it. It also keeps the Sisyphian myth in parallel to validate the arguments of the paper.

**Key Words:** Myth of Sisyphus, Ennui of Life, Monotonousness, Existentialism.

**Kobo Abe**

Kobo Abe, who holds an important position in contemporary Japanese literature, was born in Tokyo, Japan, on March 7, 1924. 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. Although Abe has written many works, the work that brought worldwide recognition and fame is undoubtedly *The Woman in the Dunes*.

**The Myth of Sisyphus**

Albert Camus who was born in 1913 was an active participant of French Resistance movement. He never saw himself as an existentialist, but his works delineated themes of absurdity, anguish, anxiety and alienation. Albert Camus sketches a hero of sorts – who takes life as it comes – in his most famous essay “The Myth of Sisyphus”. For the titular hero, he borrows the character Sisyphus from Greek mythology. His essay, “The Myth of Sisyphus” is a blend of a piece from Greek mythology and his own theory (which he doesn't call as existentialism). The essay doesn't just analyze the life of Sisyphus but gives a detailed portrayal of the absurdities of life and what life has to offer or impose on an individual, which according to Albert Camus is futility and meaninglessness.

Sisyphus – a king in ancient Greece – who was good in tricking people, tied Thanatos (death) stopping him from going about his job of taking people's lives. Zeus has to intervene as Thanatos was tied up by Sisyphus and no one died during that phase. Sisyphus was taken to Hades as a step to punish him for his act. He excused himself saying that he is going to meet his wife and punish her for not giving him a proper burial. Sisyphus, to return to the world, asked his wife to throw his body into the street to show it as a possible excuse to escape from Hades. And once he was free, he never reported to Hades and died of old age. The anger stricken gods planned on a punishment which would make Sisyphus too busy to make plan for an escape. The offence that Sisyphus had committed against Zeus got him a punishment which needed him to ceaselessly roll a huge boulder to the top of a mountain, and once it reaches the top, the boulder would roll to the bottom and Sisyphus has to start all over again.

Albert Camus uses the myth surrounding Sisyphus to depict the meaninglessness of human existence in the world. He also sees Sisyphus as someone who derives pleasure out of that act of taking the boulder to the top, even though he knows about the very inevitable result of the process in

which he is involved. He is conscious of his state, yet he submits himself without any reluctance.

The novel by Kobo Abe titled *The Woman in the Dunes* has a striking resemblance and seems to be inspired from the myth of Sisyphus. It is considered to be the modern retelling of the myth of Sisyphus. The novel deals with the life of an amateur entomologist named NikiJumpei, who falls in the trap laid by the villagers and gets stuck there forever. His only companion is a widow, with whom he has to shovel the sand which constantly seeps through the house which lies in a 60-foot pit. The constant shoveling of the sand is a Sisyphean task in itself. The sand is never going to stop seeping, nor their constant shoveling.

Following are some lines from the novel *The Woman in the Dunes* which are used here to strengthen the claim that the novel is inspired from the myth of Sisyphus and it can be rightly called as a modern retelling of the myth of Sisyphus.

Kobo Abe writes of the man and his mental state in *The Woman in the Dunes*,

“The sand never stopped falling. The man was completely at a loss. He was bewildered, rather as if he had casually stepped on the tail of a snake that he had thought to be small but had turned out to be surprisingly large; by the time he had realized this, its head was already threatening him from behind” (39).

The lines capture the plight of the life in the village where the sand pours in continuously. And when the protagonist witnesses it for the very first time, he is shell-shocked. He realizes the situation he has been stuck into. The surrounding he is in is sure to terrorize anyone. He never thought that he would be in a situation like this and never ever imagined that it would be this large.

“But this means you exist only for the purpose of clearing away the sand, doesn't it?” (39), asks NikiJumpei. The issue of existence comes into play in the above said line where the entomologist questions the woman if her only reason to live is to shovel the sand. In the movie adaptation of the novel, the narrator raises a question to the woman if she survives to shovel or shovels to survive. This line brings back the age-old existentialist debate which

questions if existence precedes essence or essence precedes existence.

“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” (177), says Kobo Abe. The lines bear a striking resemblance to the punishment given to Sisyphus. He was continuously engaged in the act of moving up the boulder to the top of the mountain, even though it just resulted in the boulder rolling to the bottom once it touched the top. He was engaged in this monotonous job with no other way to go. He couldn't do anything to stop this repetition. Likewise, the entomologist gets stuck in the pit and has been the task of shoveling the sand continuously. And his life in the pit adds to the misery, as he has nothing to do over there. He cannot even go for a walk and have a breath of fresh air, or even have a sight of the sea.

“Compared with a farmer's work, shoveling away the sand is like trying to pile up rocks in the River of Hades, where the devils cart them off as fast as you throw them in” (188), says Kobo Abe. The boulder which Sisyphus moves to the top of the mountain comes all the way to the bottom once it reaches the top. But Sisyphus doesn't stop rolling the boulder even though he knows that all his efforts are going to end in vain. The man and the woman in the novel keep shoveling the sand, irrespective of their efforts the sand keeps seeping all through the house. Their efforts go wasted like the process to try pile up rocks in the River of Hades which is constantly ruined by the intervention of devils who cart them off.

“Not a thing. It's an infernal punishment precisely because nothing happens” (188), says Kobo Abe. The line reminds one of the punishment which was given to Sisyphus to stop him from escaping. He continuously has to work with the boulder and there is no escape from it. The process has no possible end to it. The process of shoveling by the lead characters alters nothing. The sand keeps seeping and they both keep shoveling. Their shoveling has no end. It is as if they are victims who have to suffer eternally.

**Ennui**

The word 'ennui' is a French term for boredom. Ennui as defined by the British Dictionary is a feeling of listlessness and general dissatisfaction resulting from lack of activity or excitement." It has its origin from old French.

There is escape from everything but one cannot escape from boredom. It is not just a phase in life but a person goes through it many a times. It occurs when a person is emotionally drained and down and out. One strives real hard to overcome that phase while others submit themselves to that situation and drown in the sea of boredom.

NikiJumpei finds himself in a tough situation when he is kept as a captive by the villagers in the hole. He cannot climb his way out of the hole as the villagers have taken away the rope ladder. His monotonous existence in the hole with nothing to do than shoveling the sand takes a toll on him emotionally, physiologically as well as psychologically.

The following are some instances which offer a bird's eye view of the suffering NikiJumpei went through and the measures he took to counter the boredom of being in a hole.

"The theory had been advanced that the man, tired of life, had committed suicide" (4), says the narrator about the notion that people had about the sudden disappearance of NikiJumpei. He was tired of his monotonous daily life which made him go mad literally. To escape his boring daily life he planned on a trip to a village on the lookout for new species of insects which he had made his pastime.

"But this means you exist only for the purpose of clearing away the sand, doesn't it?" (39), asks the man to the woman. He puts forward a serious question which startles the readers as the woman does no other thing daily than shoveling the sand. She doesn't even venture out of the hole and it poses a serious question about her notion of life.

"In fact; his involvement with sand and his insect collecting were, after all, simply ways to escape, however temporarily, from his obligations and the inactivity of his life" (40), says the narrator. To NikiJumpei, being an entomologist was a perfect excuse to break away from his boring day-to-day life pattern. He had lots of things to look after but all of

them turned out to be repetitive. It was seen as a way of escaping from his commitments at times a tedious and boring task.

"She looked like some kind of insect, he thought. Did she intend to go on living like this forever? From the outside, this place seemed only a tiny spot of earth, but when you were at the bottom of the hole you could see nothing but limitless sand and sky. A monotonous existence enclosed in an eye. She had probably spent her whole life down here, without even the memory of a comforting word from anyone. Perhaps her heart was throbbing now like a girl's because they had trapped him and given him to her. It was too pitiful!" (63), feels the narrator.

The woman seems to represent an insect which moves aimlessly which doesn't think anything related future nor it cares about the present. When a person saw her he/she could see nothing but loneliness in her eyes. She had no one to hold on to. And now she had him as a support and she wants to hold on to him at any cost, even without him wishing to stay in that place.

"It was not impossible that things had happened so. It was rather like being shut up in a cell with a lock that had no key. If even the people of the region themselves had to put up with imprisonment, then the precipitous wall of sand was no laughing matter for him. He became desperate and insistent" (88), says the narrator.

It was not being held as captive NikiJumpei detested, it is the state where he was held captive and had nothing to do he hated the most. It is that he wanted to break away from. It was a situation from which there is literally no escape. One could come to know the seriousness of the situation only if they were in it.

"I'm not joking. Ask yourself. You ought to understand. Even a dog'll go mad if you keep it shut up in a cage" (89), said NikiJumpei. He points out the necessity of having time off from the monotonous and tedious job of shoveling the sand in the above lines. Even an animal if chained for a long span in a same place will have nothing to do of its own and

will go mad. That is the brunt of being held up in a same place with nothing to do.

“When he actually began working, for some reason he did not resist it as much as he thought he would. What could be the cause of this change? he wondered. Was it the fear that the water would be discontinued? Was it because of his indebtedness to the woman, or something about the character of the work itself? Work seemed something fundamental for man, something which enabled him to endure the aimless flight of time” (158), says the narrator.

A man has to do something to something to keep himself busy. The man has nothing to do than shoveling the sand in the hole. So he had changed his mind set and kept himself occupied with the process of shoveling. It has to do a lot with boredom than the fear for the villagers.

The narrator quotes as the lecturer speaking, “The only way to go beyond work is through work. It is not that work itself is valuable; we surmount work by work. The real value of work lies in the strength of self-denial.” (158) The lecturer cites work as the only way to keep oneself busy and by work we tend to forget other commitments. It is the only process by which a person makes him/herselves content. By that they tend to make themselves content and say all is well with their life..

“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” (177), says the narrator. Repetition forms an integral part in a person’s life. It is present in all the nook and corners in all stages of the life. But the repetition alone would not make one’s life interesting. It should be there but only in specified amount.

“I didn’t understand. But life isn’t something one can understand, I suppose. There are all kinds of life, and sometimes the other side of the hill looks greener. What’s hardest for me is not knowing what living like this will ever come to. But obviously you can never know, no matter what sort of life you live. Somehow I can’t help but feel it would be better to have a

little more to keep busy with” (207-208), says the man.

The man doesn’t know what he is going to do the rest of his life; he doesn’t want to end up shoveling all through his life. He is confused whether he would be content with this life of merely shoveling the sand. He wants to do something more that would keep him occupied.

“Breathing, walking, bowel movements, daily schedules, Sundays coming every seven days, final exams after every four months, far from quieting him, had had the effect rather of pushing him toward a new repetition of them” (215), says the narrator. Whatever the man did to get away from the monotonous life it all ended in vain. He found repetition in all minute things he did and experienced. The things he thought that helped him get away from the monotonous life are a repetition in itself. It all occurred on a daily basis.

#### **One cannot escape life’s pattern**

It is a known fact that a person who is under the influence of monotony and boredom is prone to psychological and physiological illness. The people under the influence may opt for extreme measures to counter monotony. One may even commit suicide due to peer pressure. The pressure is such that the receiver is an ideal easy victim for mental illnesses.

NikiJumpei, the entomologist, is kept as a captive in a hole by the villagers and has the task before him of constantly shoveling the sand. He comes to the village to escape from his boring day-to-day work, schedules, obligations, and inactivity of life. But what happens is that he is caught in a trap laid by the villagers and has to shovel the sand which doesn’t do anything but increase human monotony. He tries his best to escape from the dunes as he doesn’t want to end up shoveling all through his life.

When all his efforts of escaping the dunes fail he resorts to shovel the sand and goes about doing his job without any complaints. He feels that he is being followed by monotony and boredom irrespective of the place he is in. He couldn’t do anything about it or he wants to take the extreme step of committing suicide. He doesn’t want to survive and he wants to live life at its fullest.

He doesn't want to die like a dog which is constantly under the control of its owner. He wants to live a free man for which he would do anything. He makes the woman stone drunk and tries to escape the hole but in the process he is caught by the villagers. It is also to be noted that he molests the woman in full public view of the villagers just to get the nod from the villagers for a walk along the beach to get a breath of fresh air.

The man is ready to do anything that would guarantee him freedom. To keep himself busy with something is also one of wishes of the man; it is something which people around the world wish for as one cannot put up with monotony. He invents a trap to catch crows to send messages through it to attract people's attention of him being held as a captive in the hole. When his efforts to bait a crow fail he is distraught. But after some time to his surprise he sees water being accumulated in the trap. He sees some kind of hope in it as he thinks that it would be mighty useful for the village which suffers from water scarcity. It is also a find which would make him get the attention he likes to get from the villagers. It would strengthen his position among the villagers and he would be in a commanding position.

The woman gets pregnant and he starts to find a sense of belonging in the dunes. He comes to terms with his life and accepts what comes his way. When she suffers from labor pain and is being taken to the hospital the rope ladder is let down and it is not taken away to the man's surprise.

"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. He might as well put off his escape until sometime after that" (239), says the narrator.

There is more amount of excitement on the part of the man as he has found water which is most

necessary for the whole village. It is about that he is very much concerned about at this point of time. He has the upper-hand over the villagers for the first time and he doesn't want to give that up easily for he can escape anytime he wishes as the rope lies there before him. It is more of proving what he is worthy of which makes him stay back in the village. And he also learns that monotony and boredom are integral parts of life which a man cannot escape from.

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