

What does it mean to be well-adjusted in Kōbō Abe's *The Woman in the Dunes*?

*Unless otherwise indicated all page numbers refer to Kōbō Abe,
The Woman in the Dunes (New York: Vintage International, 1991)*

For the Greeks, $\chi\alpha\omicron\varsigma$ was the origin out of which the order of the universe was wrought. In Kōbō Abe's *The Woman in the Dunes* (「砂の女」: *Suna no Onna*), disorder, entropy, and flow are singularly embodied in the omnipresent leitmotif: sand. I will first discuss the function of sand as a trope in this work, and elaborate my claim that Abe presents us here with what is, in part, a self-help guide to mortality. Far from being a freedom, the chaos of the sands represents a draining and wearying lack of control. Conversely, it is through repetition, through sustained engagement and identification with one's surroundings (the slogan reads "Love Your Home"¹), through hard work and through sex that Abe seems chiefly to represent the possibility of orienting oneself within the flow of time as an attainable goal. In the process, one is – in a sense – "trapped" and one is also thus complicit in one's own entrapment. The question then becomes whether following the path to becoming well-adjusted is portrayed by Abe as a regrettable surrender to normative forces. Whist there

¹ p.37

might seem to be little free will for the novel's protagonist within the village community's structure of rewards and punishments, I will argue that given: (a.) the complicity involved in one's own commodification, (b.) the complicity called for in the acting out of a social role, and (c.) the complicity necessary before submitting oneself to social ideals of duty; *The Woman in the Dunes* presents in stark relief the ambiguity inherent in assessments of subjectification. I examine the relationship between Jumpei and the widow, then between Jumpei and the village to assert my claim that while these three axes meet at and constructively illuminate nexuses of ambivalence in both cases, the strength of the text lies in the lacunae it carves out in place of dichotomous truths.

For the protagonist, Jumpei Niki, sand is an obsession as engrossing as entomology. As Jumpei comes gradually to assume the wind-swept sand dunes as his natural habitat, he resembles more closely the sand-dwelling insects – orthoptera, rhynchota, various beetles – which intrigued him at the start of his expedition. The imagery of sand and insect-like behaviour pervades the text – as when the narrator observes the unnamed widow, the woman in the dunes, eating with a piece of plastic over her head: “She looked like some kind of insect”². Yet it is sand in this text that is capable of carrying far greater metaphorical weight.

² p.63

In this work it comes to embody the flow of lived time, thus mortality, thus the shapelessness of life and it then becomes an implicit comment on the nature of freedom.

I shall briefly trace the path of this current. Jumpei recalls a conversation he had with his union colleague whom he calls the “Möbius man”, in the context of “a system of education that imputes meaning to life”³:

The reason I brought up the example of sand was because in the final analysis I rather think the world is like sand. The fundamental nature is very difficult to grasp when you think of it in its stationary state. Sand not only flows, but this very flow *is* the sand. ⁴

This definition for sand / lived time builds upon an earlier causal explanation concerning how the wavelength of fluid turbulence matches the diameter of desert sand particles and thus draws them from the soil⁵. Such an understanding would allow us to see sand as a phenomenon attendant to fluid systems, as part of a wave rather than as just a collection of particles; and as part of a process of ongoing disintegration, a systemic decay which silently betokens death. Jumpei imagines that since the birth of sand grains is inevitable wherever winds and water currents flow over land, that “Gently but surely they invaded and destroyed the surface of the earth”⁶.

In the nightly labour of the protagonists of *The Woman in the Dunes*, the strenuous

³ p.98

⁴ p.99

⁵ p.14

⁶ ibidem

digging is directed towards keeping the encroaching sand from overwhelming the house and thus the rest of the village. The village is protected by a line of such houses embedded in holes to create a bulwark within the dunes. Jumpei's first reaction to this sight is "You'll never finish, no matter how long you work at it"⁷. At this stage he does not appreciate that it is only the continued and endless labour to impose order upon the ceaseless flow of the sands which keeps him and all of the villagers alive. To hold out for some short while in a series of valiant rear-guard manoeuvres against the ceaseless ever-onward flowing march of time is all that remains for the characters of this novel – thus sand comes to represent mortality and the inherent shapelessness of life:

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. The very fact that it had no form was doubtless the highest manifestation of its strength, was it not?⁸

The challenge which therefore presents itself in the face of the vast inchoate formlessness of this lived experience is one of adaptation. How is it possible to inscribe oneself into the flow of time, to create the order from which one, in Jumpei's words, "imputes meaning to life"⁹? The inherent problem of freedom is most comically underscored by the widow. When Jumpei suggests that she might like to go for a walk outside the confines of

⁷ p.32
⁸ p.31
⁹ p.98

their hole in the sand – as she presumably used to do before his arrival – she replies, “Yes, but I get all tired out, walking for no particular reason. . . . But I have taken walks . . . Really, they used to make me walk a lot”¹⁰. In the shapelessness of sand and time, the inherent problem with freedom is “walking for no particular reason”.

In describing the psychological journey of his protagonist Jumpei Niki, Kōbō Abe is able to set out a self-help guide to mortality. Jumpei finds that repetition functions to accentuate and punctuate the experience of the temporal: he says of his partner’s needlework, “Her repetitious movements gave colour to the present and a feeling of actuality”¹¹. In a metaphorical landscape where “What was bad about the sand was that one wasted strength, not because one’s feet sank into it but because there was no resistance”¹² repetitive work proves to be a way of giving both meaning and resistance to the texture of time. Jumpei comments that for mankind, it is work (in his case “especially monotonous handwork”¹³) which “enabled him to endure the aimless flight of time”¹⁴ and later “It goes on, terrifyingly repetitive. One could not do without repetition in life, like the beating of the heart”¹⁵. Sex too, seems to enable Jumpei to inscribe himself into the rhythm of a cyclical organic time with

¹⁰ p.89
¹¹ p.214
¹² p.185
¹³ p.214
¹⁴ p.158
¹⁵ p.177

better composure – offering a regular anaesthetic wherein to spend his surplus energy and ultimately resulting in the pregnancy of his partner.

There was a spasmodic contraction, and again the same thing ... the same changeless repetition to which he had devoted himself, dreaming of other things: eating, walking, sleeping, hiccoughing, bawling, copulating.¹⁶

The practice of the sexual act seems itself not only to immerse the protagonist in a timeless eternal – briefly salving an endless preoccupation – but also simultaneously and paradoxically to connect the protagonist with the timeless repetition which marks daily life. This experience functions to encompass the transcendent and the quotidian.

More than eight months after his arrival and at the end of the narrative, Jumpei Niki appears to have a clear opportunity to escape, which he chooses not to take. Although upon having climbed out of the hole, he is specifically drawn back by the sight of his water trap needing repair, by this stage this is one of several factors which combine to keep him from leaving. Jumpei's enthusiasm over the success of the water trap – and his desire to communicate it to someone who will share his relish for it – is significant because it demonstrates that Jumpei has identified thoroughly with his surroundings. To take such delight in having, in essence, scored a victory against the sand demonstrates that he has internalised the struggle of the villagers as one which is also his.

¹⁶ p.141

Complications permitting, he and the woman in the dunes are to have a child, and have already invested jointly in the surrogate child that is their new radio. The relationship he is in therefore, as well as the biological acclimatisation which leaves him disappointed and discomfited to taste the air above the hole¹⁷, and the “certain gentle contentment”¹⁸ of his new straightforward life of rarefied mathematical beauty (under “heavens governed by an extremely simple elliptic cycle, and the sand dunes ruled by the $\frac{1}{8}$ -mm. wavelengths”¹⁹); these then, are all aspects which persuade him to stay. We further learn that over six years later, he is still missing. He has, it would seem, become well-adjusted.

Whilst we have hitherto examined strategies for adaptation depicted in this work, it is clear that there is a problem. If there is a certain gentle contentment about the ending of this novel, surely it must be ambivalently undercut for readers by a deep unease at the circumstances in which it was achieved. Here is depicted a man who is press-ganged into hard labour, a woman who has been prostituted by a community into functioning as his wife, a community which has conspired to imprison both – and of which many members attempted to force the couple to have sex in public for their own amusement. If this also happens to be

¹⁷ p.239

¹⁸ p.215

¹⁹ *ibid.*

the story of a nervous recluse becoming a productive and happy member of a village community, then by presenting this social microcosm Abe would seem to be depicting the process of becoming well-adjusted as consisting of being complicit in one's own self-deception, commodification and imprisonment.

The Woman in the Dunes frequently presents situations in which along three primary axes, the complicity of the subject in their own subjectification makes explicit profound ambiguities which defy the imposition of privileged dichotomies. To unpack this statement somewhat, the three primary axes I would distinguish are those of commodification, social role-playing and social duty. By privileged dichotomies, I refer to dichotomies in which one term is privileged above the other such as male / female, dominant / subjugated, and strong / weak.

To take commodification as the axis, Jumpei is at first unnerved by the sexual advances of the widow: "He realized that it was doubtless deliberately done to show off her dimple, and unconsciously his body stiffened. He thought it especially indecent of her just after she had been speaking of her loved one's death"²⁰. Jumpei's attitude towards sex seems

²⁰ p.30

neurotically and precociously prudish given the allusions to “his other woman”²¹ with dirty fingernails²² and his experiences with brothels²³ and prostitutes²⁴, yet as a consequence he does delineate otherwise obscure ambivalences. The widow later attempts to stop Jumpei from damaging the fabric of the building and in the ensuing tussle, they find themselves caught in a potentially sexually clinch. She quips “City women are all pretty, aren’t they?”²⁵ and the sexual tension of the situation dissolves. Jumpei at the point of this utterance feels “suddenly ashamed”²⁶ and the woman of the dunes has again demonstrated that she not only wills sex with the man who has been assigned to her, but that she also retains agency over when she will enable it.

Here the second axis – of social role-playing – comes to overlap the first of commodification. Jumpei’s reasons for his withdrawal are complex:

Yet the average woman was firmly convinced, it seemed, that she could not make a man recognize her worth unless every time she opened her legs she did so as if it were a scene in a soap opera. But this very pathetic and innocent illusion in fact made women the victims of a one-sided, spiritual rape. ²⁷

Jumpei refuses to play along with the gender roles which would make him a soap-opera actor using poorly scripted lines to beguile the woman into having sex. The rhetorical rigmarole of

²¹ p.132

²² p.215

²³ p.133

²⁴ p.140

²⁵ p.132

²⁶ ib.

²⁷ ib.

parley corralled to assure the lady's conscience of her esteem – and in retrospect, her modesty – is abandoned here. Jumpei will neither “bargain for her body”²⁸, nor will he accept the melodramatic role of the overpowering villain as the woman in Jumpei's earlier life had cast him: “Her mirror made him impotent. Her woman's innocence had turned him into an enemy”²⁹. Jumpei has rejected this kind of gratification early on, despite the archetypal roles available to him: “Perhaps he would feel better if he slapped the naked woman. But wouldn't this be just the part he was expected to play? She was waiting for it”³⁰. Since both characters are at different times mutually complicit in their own domination and their own seduction, instrumentalisation becomes hard to place. Jumpei moots conceiving of casual sex as “mutual rape”³¹ – a position reminiscent of the Kantian assertion that marital sexual relations involve mutual instrumentalisations that cancel each other out – but as the paragraph continues, this is a position identified with over-preoccupation. Intercourse follows, and in the lacuna of ambiguity which Abe has carved out, the act now seems uncomplicated for being susceptible to many readings – none of them obvious.

The third axis of social duty or social obligation intersects this relationship in the

²⁸ p.139

²⁹ p.134

³⁰ p.52

³¹ p.138

question of indebtedness. Jumpei initially wants to pay the widow for the accommodation and board of the nights that he has stayed, and later whilst attempting to escape after 46 days of captivity³², he rationalises that he need not feel bound by the relationship: “there was no reason for him to feel any obligation or responsibility for her [post-coital] smile. By his disappearance she would lose only a fragment of her life, one that could easily be replaced by a radio or a mirror”³³ and “From the beginning there had been no contract between him and her”³⁴. Whilst this may be representative of the nature of their relationship at some level, particularly given the circumstances of her original collusion in his ensnarement, as a retrograde manoeuvre intended to salve his conscience it smacks of disingenuousness.

How much should an accreted sense of emotional obligation rightfully bind Jumpei to a relationship begun in lust and perpetuated by cohabitation under duress? One senses that in the case of the tenderness which develops between Jumpei and the widow – such that Jumpei resolves during his escape attempt to “put all the money he had into the best transistor on the market”³⁵ and send it to her – the agency with which both parties eventually invest in the relationship must surely incur a level of mutual obligation, to make the chance origin of

³² p.171

³³ p.186

³⁴ p.190

³⁵ p.187

the relationship irrelevant. Would it not perhaps be reasonable to say of relationships in a more general sense as a function of their ad hoc nature, that there cannot be the clear-cut distinction which Jumpei seeks to make between real relationships and non-contractual relations? He is ultimately able only to come to the following resolutions: “He could definitely guarantee that if she wasn’t exactly a lady she was also not a prostitute”³⁶ and “then he had decided to leave off trying to figure out who was indebted to whom”³⁷.

The three primary axes of commodification, social role-playing and social duty meet at the nexus of the subjectification between the widow and Jumpei. It can neither be said accurately that the widow is solely the captor or the community’s prostitute, nor that Jumpei is instrumentalising the widow. Both are complicit to varying degrees in their own instrumentalisation and imprisonment. The widow’s first acquiescence to sex is willing and Jumpei’s final stay is a self-imposed imprisonment. The picture which Abe presents of the process of socialisation in these circumstances is not one of willing self-deception and is not thoroughly pejorative. Neither, however, is it an entirely positive commendation that becoming well-adjusted is virtuous. Socialisation – if we accept that *The Woman in the Dunes* presents us with this – seems to be represented as an ad hoc sequence of compliances

³⁶ p.172

³⁷ p.193

with biological drives and social incentives which serve to create a habituation amenable to and sustainable within a given community.

The following exposition will apply these three primary axes to Jumpei's relations with the village by way of reinforcing this hypothesis. A Marxist reading of the central part of this novel would see Jumpei as being forced to sell his labour on pain of dehydration. His social relations revolve around the necessity for him of exchanging his labour as a commodity with those who exploit him by appropriating the benefits of his work without doing it – those would be the villagers whose village is protected from the sands as a result of his efforts in the bulwark pit. By virtue of their commodification of a once communal (or abstract) resource – in this case water – the villagers can determine how much of his labour he will be rewarded for. The apogee of his commodification is most clearly visible when, in response to his union boss' incentive scheme, he attempts to rape the widow publicly so as to gain access to the surface. He fails. However, the complexity of Kōbō Abe's work is illuminated by the fact that Jumpei comes to find fulfilment in his work and then ultimately chooses to remain exploited. Furthermore, we later learn that the surplus from the union's sale of sand to the construction industry is managed collectively and fairly redistributed by

the union³⁸.

It is originally Jumpei who admonishes the widow, “Stop being a mouthpiece; stop being treated like a slave”³⁹. Yet having passed through phases where he himself conforms to the rigid communal requirements out of necessity, then merely pragmatically, and finally because he wants to, Jumpei ultimately seems hypocritical. This social role-playing axis creates ambiguities of subjectification precisely because what begins in Jumpei’s case as a performance in the pit, becomes for him a genuine social role in which he feels comfortable.

The axis of social duty also sees an inversion which is mediated by complicit self-subjection on the part of Jumpei. Although in front of the old man of the cooperative offices Jumpei originally pays lip-service to the idea that “It’d only be human to co-operate when I see how things really are, wouldn’t it?”⁴⁰, his private feelings are that “He was angry at the things that bound the woman . . . and at the woman who let herself be bound. “Why must you cling so to such a village?””⁴¹. The inversion in Jumpei’s perception of his circumstances arises in the following passage:

“Why should we worry what happens to others?”

He was stunned. The change was complete, as if a mask had dropped over her face. It seemed to be the face of the village, bared to him through her. Until then the village was supposed to be on the side of the executioner. Or maybe they were

³⁸ p.224

³⁹ p.60

⁴⁰ p.150

⁴¹ p.40

mindless man-eating plants, or avaricious sea anemones, and he was supposed to be a pitiful victim who happened to be in their clutches. But from the standpoint of the villagers, they themselves were the ones who had been abandoned. Naturally there was no reason why they should be under obligation to the outside world.⁴²

Called to his attention has been the calculus of victimhood, under which terms Jumpei is not the victim he thought he was, but rather a liminal member of the collectively irresponsible outside world. Jumpei comes by the end of the narrative to find himself implicitly subscribing to the motto “Love Your Home” and reaching a point where he finds the narrative of his own life in the village a compelling one.

The process of reaching this point is not without complications. The weight of social obligation and commitment he is able to feel regarding the project of “the repeated battle with the sand”⁴³ is certainly proportional to his cumulative investment in it. Even in his escape attempt, he phrases it thus: “Love of Home and obligation have meaning only if one stands to lose something by throwing them away”⁴⁴. Yet this commitment is also an ideological one. For Jumpei to take on the responsibility of social ideals of duty, he must be complicit in an ideological conversion. Jumpei’s base anxiety – about the credibility of the claims that duty may have upon him – is illustrated well by his castle analogy. In the fable he recounts, a solitary and ever-vigilant guard finally notices an impending assault on the castle and sounds

⁴² p.223

⁴³ p.215

⁴⁴ p.190

the alarm; only to find that the castle was an illusion, and be killed by the enemy⁴⁵. Jumpei warns the widow that “We’ll look one day and find that the villagers have disappeared to a man and that we’re the only ones left. . . . What we’ve done for them up till now will be just a joke to them”⁴⁶. If Jumpei one day wakes up to find the work and the life of the bulwark pit compelling then it is arguably because he has persuaded himself to believe in its meaningfulness. We could not say that he is trapped by his feelings of responsibility, moral obligation, or duty to the one whom he loves; rather that he has persuaded himself to subscribe to the ideals which make the experience of being trapped meaningful.

To conclude, the leitmotif of sand provides a metaphor for the problem of lived time in this work and Kōbō Abe depicts a *modus vivendi* for orienting oneself within the mortal flow through – in the case of Jumpei Niki – repetition, sex, work and identification with his surroundings. Is the well-adjusted Jumpei that results a cause for celebration in this text? It is fruitful to examine the work as in part a meditation on complicity along three primary axes of ambivalence: commodification, social role-playing and social duty. In this analysis I believe it becomes clearer that Abe presents a nuanced picture of socialisation in which free will, necessity and complicity are hard to disentangle.

⁴⁵ p.160

⁴⁶ p.222

Through its stark quasi-game-theoretic set-pieces played out by Jumpei Niki, the widow and the villagers, this work does suggest the following. For Jumpei, living in a meaningful way comes to necessitate being trapped by a self-imposed commitment to a framework of rewards and penalties. Given that the lines between casual and formalised relationships are demonstrably blurry, the cohabitation of Jumpei and the widow evinces ad hoc improvisational qualities such that the individual exchanges define the nature of the game itself; and thus the point beyond which it becomes disingenuous to deny the meaningfulness of the relationship could be indicated by how fervent the denials are. And finally, Abe's *The Woman in the Dunes* suggests that the performance of a social role over time can come to be a convincing enough expression of oneself that – for Jumpei, as for the widow – one no longer feels the need to distinguish exploitation, entrapment or escape as categories.

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