

Levels of Sexuality in the Novels of Kobo Abe

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Originally better known abroad than in his own country, Kobo Abe is paradoxically the most "Japanese" of all the writers of his generation and the most international. While his figurative language remains essentially Japanese ("His left shoulder made a sound like the splitting of chopsticks"), his themes are decidedly Western. Abe shares with writers like Dostoevsky, Kafka, and Robbe-Grillet an obsession for the *hallucination vraie*, the imaginary made "real" through an accumulation of precise detail. Abe's "visions" never fall apart upon a second reading, because the "science" in them is so solidly based.¹

But the key to understanding any Abe novel lies in the reader's ability to decipher the various levels of sexuality. All of Abe's protagonists are elitist mole-men, characters who resemble Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov, Kafka's K., and Robbe-Grillet's Wallas in that they are hypersensitive, fragile creatures with strong intellects and weak egos. They are all scientists, whose analytic and self-reflective powers have reached full maturity, but whose emotional capacities have either atrophied or become fixated in late adolescence. Pathetically isolated and introverted, they prefer data over people, because figures are empirical, while people are unpredictable. As narrators, they are both trustworthy (because of their ability to observe) and unreliable (because of their inability to interpret correctly what they observe).

Real confrontation almost always comes in the form of a woman, fragmented as a sexual object through voyeuristic camera-like close-ups and associated with insect- or animal-imagery. But Abe's women possess superior intellects, which enable them to manipulate the male narrators into sexual confrontations. When sex occurs, it is always described at the level of animal instinct: a sex that resolves the narrator's divided tendencies toward aggression (as a man) and withdrawal (as a scientist), a sex which forges new identity by obliterating rational intellect.

The scientist in *The Woman in the Dunes*² sees his own imprisonment in terms of role-reversal: he sees himself as the bugs he collects as a scientist, and the de-anthropomorphism of the insect and animal imagery universalizes his predicament: "He had been lured by the beetle into a desert from which there was no escape—like some famished mouse" (p. 50). Or: "He was like an animal who finally sees that the crack in the fence it was trying to escape through is in reality merely the entrance to its cage—like a fish who at last realizes, after bumping its nose numberless times, that the glass of the goldfish bowl is a wall" (p. 123). He extends this imagery to his relations with the woman: "You thought I'd spring at once if a woman was there, like some dog or cat" (p. 59). And:

¹Abe's university training was as a medical doctor, the degree for which he was given only on condition that he sign a paper stating that he would never practice medicine. Such a practice is fairly common in Japan; to prevent despair and potential suicide, teachers pass students rather than fail them, resulting in the degree being granted only when it is rendered worthless. This irony has not been lost in Abe's novels, in which the scientist-protagonists are trapped by the very science they practice.

²Kobo Abe, *The Woman in the Dunes*, translated by E. Dale Saunders (Rutland: Tuttle, 1967). Subsequent quotes are from this edition. The Japanese title is *Suna no Onna*.

"Her shoulders drooped, but she made no further attempt to move; she was like a dejected, unjustly abused puppy" (p. 60). Direct sexual contact between them is expressed with the imagery of dogs and cats, Abe's way of saying that the sex, although described in the most graphic anatomical terms, is, nevertheless, domesticated and humanized. The animal imagery (simple, direct, primitive) contrasts sharply with the sex of voyeurism and intellectual remove he had experienced with his wife in Tokyo: "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" (p. 141).

Without the humanizing of the animal imagery, the man can only conceive of pure feeling in sex, without this inhibiting consciousness and the threat of "spiritual rape," in terms of death:

To be sure, he himself wasn't so romantic as to dream of pure sexual relations. You could do that when you were looking death in the eye . . . like the bamboo grass that bears seeds just as it is beginning to wither . . . like starving mice that repeatedly and frantically copulate as they migrate . . . like tuberculosis patients who are all seized by a kind of sex madness . . . like the king or ruler who dwells in a tower and devotes himself to establishing a harem . . . like the soldier for whom every moment is precious as he awaits the enemy attack and who spends those final moments masturbating . . . (pp. 136-37)

His imprisonment engenders his freedom. Presumed missing and then dead in Tokyo, the man begins to live for the first time. He discovers a way to preserve water in the sand, a discovery of far greater import than the rare beetle he had originally come to find and a discovery that could only be appreciated by the people of the dunes; his captors. Significantly, the discovery of water preservation coincides with the news of the woman's pregnancy. He stays, even when there is every chance for escape, because the woman in the dunes gives him what his wife in Tokyo had never given him: an offspring, a sanctification of sex as pure feeling.

*The Face of Another*³ involves the same mixture of applied science and speculative psychology, again with the woman as mediator. But here the aggression-withdrawal dialectic is expressed reflexively, in terms of writing, as exemplified in Abe's curious paraphrase of the Flaubert dictum: "Perhaps the act of writing is necessary only when nothing happens" (p. 237).

The plot is a pretext: a scientist's face is badly disfigured. Sexual relations with his wife cease. He contrives to build a mask so perfect that it will pass for another's face. This scientist involves himself in a love-sex triangle with his wife and his "other self." He is at once the seducer and the betrayed husband. The novel becomes an excursus on jealousy, and the struggle between old and new selves becomes, with the wife as catalyst, the struggle between action and writing. The irony, of course, is that writing is aligned with reason and intellect, with passivity and voyeurism, with a sterilized urban existence. Thus, the fact that the novel was written at all dooms the narrator's experiment, negating any reconciliation with the woman and any chance for integrating the two selves at the level of pure feeling.

³Kobo Abe, *The Face of Another*, translated by E. Dale Saunders (Rutland: Tuttle, 1967). Subsequent quotes are from this edition. The Japanese title is *Tanin no Kao*.

The narcissism of the writing process contains the elements of its own extinction in the images of physical decay: "Suddenly, a deep hole popped open in my face. It seemed gouged out so deep that with my whole body in it there would still have been more room. A liquid, like pus from a decayed tooth, dribbled down. Terrific stench in the room, catching the sound, came swarming out like cockroaches—from inside the chair, from the corner of the cabinet, from the drain of the sink, from the lamp shade discolored with dead bodies of insects" (pp. 18-19). Abe's images of putrefaction are so lurid that they literally beg for, as well as telescope, the impending metamorphosis. The accident which disfigured the scientist's face is, then, merely an actualization of an already deeply-engrained self-hatred.

Writing ceases to be a separate activity, becoming identical with action in the third notebook, which recounts direct confrontations with the wife. Digressions cease. Dialogue takes over. Having seen through the disguise, the wife allows herself to be "seduced" without protest. Tension is maintained in this section, still totally within the mind of the narrator, by an extended analysis of jealousy as it applies to multiple personality. The narrator concludes that sex is closely associated with death and that jealousy is a product of animal instinct and not of civilizations. If true, then jealousy belongs to ego and not to intellect; thus, it is one of the tools for real metamorphosis. It forges change by paralyzing reason. Significantly, the narrator defines jealousy through animal imagery: "In the final analysis, jealousy itself is something like a pet cat that insists on its rights but does not accept its duties" (p. 169).

The analogy is prophetic, since the mask functions in the same way: it insists on its rights but does not accept its duties. The mask demands seduction in spite of the still functioning moral mind of the scientist behind the mask. Trapped in that contradiction, the scientist becomes hopelessly jealous of himself, unable even to experience the seduction of the seducer. He remains a passive voyeur, watching himself make love to his wife. This watching and reflecting, like the writing process itself at the heart of the diary, is what the wife reproaches him for in her appended letter to the notebooks. She hates him for not really becoming the mask, for creating dichotomy without synthesis. The end of the novel is also the end of the diary, of writing and reflecting. There is only direct action left, action unmediated by reason. The narrator waits for the wife to return, prepared to murder her. Perhaps the act of writing is necessary only when nothing happens: writing stops and nothing happens.

A similar koan predominates in *The Ruined Map*⁴: "I began walking in the opposite direction from her . . . perhaps in order to reach her" (p. 299). The scientist-protagonist here is a detective, assigned to find a man who has disappeared. Like Robbe-Grillet's detectives, this one is in reality searching for self. The brother-in-law of the missing man, involved in a blackmail racket and a homosexual boys' ring, is murdered in the presence of the detective. A shop clerk, obsessed with nude photographs and possessed by a compulsive desire to lie, commits suicide while talking on the telephone with the detective. The detective resigns his job. When he then returns to the wife of the missing man, he has become the missing man. The novel relates his constant left-turn journey from hunter to hunted.

⁴Kobo Abe, *The Ruined Map*, translated by E. Dale Saunders (Rutland: Tuttle, 1970). Subsequent quotes are from this edition. The Japanese title is *Moyetsukita Chizu*. Professor Saunders told me that the Japanese title refers literally to a matchbook cover and not to a map. The literal translation is perhaps more appropriate than the one Saunders chose, since, in the novel's final scene, the amnesiac detective has only one "identity" card left: a matchbook cover with the woman's telephone number on it.

Early in the novel, the detective recognizes the makings of a trap, and the imagery used is that of an insect being pinned: "The sister . . . as a woman . . . I had not put it into words yet, but I was transfixed by something like a pointed tool—was it the sharp pin sticking out from the opening in the lemon-yellow curtains? I was nailed to an invisible wall like an insect specimen . . . a bit of paper pinned to the edge of the curtain" (p. 48). Later, the wife tells the detective: "I've been going around in circles, it's like a game of hide-and-seek. I have the feeling my husband's become an insect. I'll try putting honey on paper and slipping it under the bed" (p. 129). Within the make-believe world of her apartment, she plays games of hide-and-seek, inventing the clues which always prove false for the detective. In a sense, the novel is in large part her dream, and the missing man is a figment of her vivid imagination, a figment which involves the detective's strong intellect and ensnares his weak ego, so that he becomes the figment.

There is one short sequence midway through the novel in which we get a glimpse of the detective's former life. He visits his estranged wife. The sequence ends with the narrator stating: "The fact that I didn't have the courage to wait in silence until she sought me out may have eroded our relationship." The statement is prophetic when applied to the novel's climax, for the detective comes full circle on his own past as well as that of the missing man. He had fought with his wife over the fact that she wanted to open a shop. He now feels estranged from the missing man's wife, because she has also gone to work. And in the end he doesn't have the courage to wait in silence until his detective's-existence wife seeks him out. Terrorism springs from the fact that he gives up being saved, hiding from the one person who could give him a "road map" for his life. Paradoxically, his hiding is the only means of getting through the labyrinth:

Nothing would be served by being found. -What I needed now was a world I myself had chosen. It had to be my world, which I had chosen by my own free will. She searched; I hid. At length she began walking slowly away as if she had given up; suddenly she was cut off from view by a car and was already gone. I too left my crevice in the darkness and began walking in the opposite direction. I began walking, relying on a map I did not comprehend. I began walking in the opposite direction from her . . . perhaps in order to reach her. (pp. 298-99)

In a certain sense, the novel can be read backwards (figuratively speaking) as well as forwards because of all the interior duplications and identity doublings; the novel's progression is also the only explanation for the novel's past: that is, for events which are "given" when the novel opens. The detective becomes the missing man which the detective (second reading) looks for, becoming the missing man, and so forth.

The Woman in the Dunes stands apart from Abe's other novels in that its conclusion allows for life beyond the sex of pure feeling with the woman. That novel's narrator triumphs both on the intellectual plane (the discovery of water preservation in sand) and on the emotional plane (the pregnancy). In *The Face of Another* and *The Ruined Map* the sexual confrontations which lead to a new identity also lead to psychic terrorism, because they eradicate intellect, leaving the weak ego to fend for itself.