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THE ISSUE OF TIME AND SPACE IN ABE KOBO'S NOVEL "THE WOMAN IN THE DUNES"

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ABOUT ARTICLE

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Abstract: This article is devoted to the study of the problem of chronotope using the example of the novel "The Woman in the Dunes" by Abe Kobo, an outstanding representative of 20th-century Japanese literature. The work pays particular attention to the theory of chronotope developed by M.M.Bakhtin, which is of great methodological importance for the analysis of literary works. Based on this theoretical approach, specific examples are used to analyze the organic unity of time and space and the ways in which they are artistically embodied in the novel.

Concepts of space and time in literary studies are explained through the notion of the chronotope. This term originates from the Greek words *chronos* (time) and *topos* (space) and denotes the inseparable interconnectedness of time and space. One of the most well-known studies devoted to the issue of the chronotope is M. M. Bakhtin's work "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel," written within the framework of historical poetics. The scholar emphasizes that the scientific foundations of this concept go back to Albert Einstein's theory of relativity. Bakhtin, however, applies this theory to literary studies in a metaphorical sense, considering the inseparable representation of time and space in a literary work to be of fundamental importance. According to his interpretation, the chronotope is one of the key categories that determine both form and content in a literary text. This article examines the

harmonious manifestation of the chronotope through the analysis of a literary work. Abe Kōbō's novel *The Woman in the Dunes* is selected as the material for the study.

In Abe Kobo's novel *The Woman in the Dunes*, the chronotope (time and space) is expressed in close harmony with the theme explored through the protagonist's complex condition and image, as well as with the overall idea of the work. The depiction of time and temporality presented by the author intensifies the oppressive and suffocating conditions of the protagonist's existence—Niki Junpei—and further deepens the stifling atmosphere that pervades the entire novel.

At this point, it is appropriate to briefly dwell on the creative work of the author. The talented writer and playwright Abe Kōbō (1924–1993) is a major figure in postwar Japanese literature, known for his works that explore themes such as human alienation, the meaninglessness of existence, and spiritual and psychological isolation in the modern era. In *Suna no Onna* (*The Woman in the Dunes*, 1962), *Tanin no Kao* (*The Face of Another*, 1964), *Hako Otoko* (*The Box Man*, 1973), and several other works, the author raises philosophical questions concerning the essence of life, social structures, and the individual's search for identity and the personal self significant novel in Abe Kobo's oeuvre, as it fully embodies the central themes of his entire creative output. The novel begins with the arrival of the protagonist—schoolteacher and amateur entomologist Niki Junpei—at a desert village for the purpose of collecting and studying sand beetles. At the invitation of the villagers, he spends the night in a house belonging to a woman who lives at the bottom of a sand pit. As the plot develops, the protagonist comes to realize that this house in the sand pit is in fact a trap set by the villagers, and that from this point onward he is condemned to forcibly assist the woman in preventing the village from being buried by sand. Against the backdrop of these events experienced by the protagonist, Abe Kōbō's reflections on life, time, fate, and human nature find their artistic expression.

Unable to understand why such events are happening to him specifically, and powerless to change his fate, the protagonist's absurd condition—his futile struggle against an external system, his isolation from the world and other people, and his confinement within a closed space—brings *The Woman in the Dunes* close to the works of Franz Kafka. Like Kafka, Abe Kōbō confronts the reader through his novel with essential questions concerning life and death, the meaninglessness of existence, and the individual's awareness of the self.

The Woman in the Dunes possesses a distinctive architectonics: it consists of 31 chapters and concludes with two official documents (“a missing person notice” and a “court verdict”). A close reading of the novel reveals the presence of two narrators, each recounting events from

different temporal planes. The first narrator appears only in the opening chapter of the novel and reports on events that occurred in the past—that is, the events narrated from Chapter 2 through the final, 31st chapter of the work.

8月のある日、男が一人、行方不明になった。休暇を利用して、汽車で半日ばかりの海岸に出掛けたり、消息をたててしまったのだ。搜索願も、新聞報告も、すべて、無駄におわった。

One day in August, a man went missing. Taking advantage of his vacation, he had set out for the coast, about half a day's journey by train, and then disappeared without a trace. Both the missing person report and the newspaper notices ended in complete futility.

The fact that the events narrated by the first storyteller took place in the past is explicitly confirmed by the novel's concluding section, presented in the form of a "court verdict."

...仁木順平... 上記の不在者に対する失踪宣告申立について、公示催告の手続きをした上、不在者は昭和30年8月18日以来7年以上生死が分からないものと認め、次のとおり審判する。...仁木順平失踪者とする。昭和37年10月5日...

...Niki Junpei... Following the petition for a declaration of disappearance concerning the above-mentioned absentee, and after the completion of the public notice procedure, it is hereby recognized that the absentee's life or death has remained unknown for more than seven years since August 18, 1955. Accordingly, the following judgment is rendered: ... Niki Junpei is hereby declared a missing person. October 5, 1962...

From these passages, it can be understood that, from a temporal perspective, the events that befall the protagonist in the novel span a total period of seven years. However, within the narrative itself, only approximately the first ten months of Niki Junpei's life in the sand pit—from August to the end of May—are depicted. It is only through the court verdict that the reader comes to realize that he ultimately remains in the sandy village of his own free will. In particular, in the final, 31st chapter of the novel, one can observe an acceleration in the progression of events: unlike in the earlier chapters, days, weeks, months, and even seasons pass in the blink of an eye. For the protagonist, who is gradually and unknowingly adapting to his fate and to a new way of life, and who accidentally invents a device that makes it possible to collect water in the sandy environment, time seems to lose its significance entirely.

また、変りばえのしない、砂と夜の何週間かが過ぎさった。(221)

....十一月のはじめに、一日四リットルを記録したのを最後にして、あとは一日ごとに、下降線をたどりはじめた。(225)

...それでもなんとか、冬が過ぎ、春になった。三月のはじめに、やっとラジオが手に入り、屋根の上に、高いアンテナをたてた。...

その月の終わりに、女が妊娠した。さらに、二た月たって、大きな白い鳥が三日にわたって西から東に飛んでいったあくる日、突然女が下半身を血に染めて、激痛を訴えだした。...

And then several weeks of unchanging sand and nights passed by... (221)

At the beginning of November, after recording four liters in a single day for the last time, the amount began to decline day by day, following a downward curve... (225)

Even so, somehow winter passed and spring arrived. At the beginning of March, he finally obtained a radio and erected a tall antenna on the roof...

By the end of that month, the woman became pregnant. Two more months passed, and the day after large white birds flew from west to east for three consecutive days, the woman suddenly complained of severe pain, her lower body stained with blood...

From Chapter 2 onward, the second narrator enters the narrative and, observing the protagonist from an external perspective, recounts in detail the events he experiences one after another. This narrator appears almost like a reporter providing the reader with daily updates on Niki Junpei's everyday life. This can be explained by the fact that the second narrator exists on the same temporal plane as the protagonist. From this point of view, in contrast to the first narrator, the second narrator—like the protagonist himself—also belongs to the past. As noted above, the plot that covers a ten-month period from a temporal standpoint is presented precisely through the voice of this second, or in other words, primary narrator.

As the possibility of escaping from the sand pit and the desire to do so gradually diminish, the representation of time and temporality also becomes increasingly vague. The author conveys the passage of time through expressions such as "...".

In general, the perception of time in the novel is complex: within the framework of the plot, it is prolonged and takes on a cyclical character. The protagonist, trapped within a single moment or temporal interval, is forced to perform the same task every day—spending the daytime digging out the sand-filled pit, only to clear it again of sand at night. He perceives the passage of time solely through the alternation of day and night. This condition turns the protagonist's life into an endless cycle in which each new day seems like a repetition of the previous one. For this reason, as in nearly all works of modernist literature, in *The Woman in the Dunes* time, having lost its linearity and form, becomes a mechanism that sustains the meaninglessness of existence.

The highly abstract representation of time in the novel resembles its central image—the fluid, formless “sand.” The absence of a concrete temporal measure powerfully exposes the protagonist’s existential void and his state of despair, caused by the fact that the passage of time leads to neither result nor transformation. This, in turn, conveys the idea that the protagonist is frozen in a moment of existence that possesses neither a future nor a past.

As for space, in contrast to time, it is rendered with remarkable clarity and concreteness. Remaining faithful to Japanese literary traditions, Abe Kobo pays particular attention to landscape description, which occupies a substantial place throughout the text.

In *The Woman in the Dunes*, space is presented as a closed and confined environment that symbolically represents the protagonist’s isolation from, or severance of ties with, the outside world. From the very beginning of the novel, the protagonist finds himself in a village, and from that moment onward he enters an enclosed space in which all connections with the external world are lost. The author devotes several pages of the narrative to the depiction of this peculiar, uncanny, and almost fantastical village.

...Suddenly the view opened up, and a small village appeared. Around a tall fire lookout tower at its center clustered poor, commonplace houses with plank roofs weighted down by small stones. Of course, some of the houses had black-tiled roofs or reddish tin roofing. A tin-roofed building stood at the only crossroads of the village and appeared to be the meeting hall of the fishermen’s cooperative. ... Beyond this, there must have been the long-sought sea and the sand dunes. Yet the village turned out to be unexpectedly large. In a few places the earth was exposed, but for the most part everything was covered with white, dry sand.

...When he turned back toward the village, he saw large pits dug ever deeper the closer they were to the crest of the dunes, arranged in multiple layers facing the center of the settlement, like a collapsing beehive. The village had overlapped with the sand dunes—or perhaps the sand dunes had overlapped with the village. In any case, it was an irritating landscape, one that would not allow a person to feel at ease.

Except for weeds that had spread shallow roots here and there—plants that would likely sprout within a day if there were sufficient moisture—there was not the slightest sign of living creatures.

In contrast to the city where the protagonist lives, the village—cut off from the outside world—functions in the novel as a significant image that generates a sense of alienation and isolation. The inhabitants of this village are themselves condemned to this space, having lost any possibility of liberation from it. This, in turn, intensifies the theme of the meaninglessness of human existence advanced in the novel and demonstrates how society can become a vast

mechanism that ensnares individuals and turns them into components of its system, allowing no escape beyond the boundaries of everyday life.

Within this enclosed village space, the author further confines the protagonist to an even more restricted environment: the woman's hut located in the sand pit. As the principal setting of the events depicted in the plot, this hut, like the village landscape, is described by the author in meticulous detail.

壁ははげ落ち、襖のかわりにムシロがかかり、柱はゆがみ、窓にはすべて板が打ちつけられ、畳はほとんど腐る一歩手前で、歩くと濡れたスポンジを踏むような音をたてた。そのうえ、焼けた砂のむれるような異臭が、いちめんにただよっていた。

The walls were peeling, straw mats hung in place of sliding doors, the pillars were warped, all the windows were boarded up, and the tatami mats were on the verge of rotting, producing a sound like stepping on a wet sponge when walked upon. Moreover, a stifling, unpleasant odor—like that of scorched, damp sand—pervaded the entire space.

Constantly threatened by the possibility of being buried beneath the sand, this hut serves as a metaphor for the concepts the author seeks to convey in the novel, such as captivity and alienation.

In conclusion, when addressing the issues of time and space in Abe Kobo's *The Woman in the Dunes*, it can be emphasized that the chronotope functions not merely as a background for events but actively shapes the novel's atmosphere and foregrounds its central philosophical themes: alienation, loneliness, the meaninglessness of existence, and the erosion of human identity under the pressure of external forces. The enclosed space, together with cyclical time and temporality, reflects the protagonist's inner world—a world caught in a constant struggle against a meaningless and hopeless reality, ensnared within the trap of its own conditions.

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