



RESEARCH PAPER

The Vicious Circles of System: A Kafkaesque Study of Kobo Abe's *The Woman in the Dunes*

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PAPER INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Received: October 19, 2021</p> <p>Accepted: December 29, 2021</p> <p>Online: December 31, 2021</p> <p>Keywords: Authority, Institutions, Kafka, Kafkaesque, Kafkan, Kobo Abe, Kundera, The Trial, The Woman in the Dune</p> <p>*Corresponding Author: expandable@gmail. com</p>	<p>This paper analyses the Kafkaesque/Kafkan features of Kobo Abe's novel <i>The Woman in the</i> as formulated by Kundera in "Kafka's World." For Kundera, in a Kafkaesque work human existence is bleakly represented through intermingling of tragedy and comedy in an indifferent world dominated by hegemonic systems. The Kafkaesque is characterised by the following: World is a huge forking labyrinthine institution where the man has been thrown to suffer its complexities, confrontation with the labyrinth makes his existence meaningless because freedom is a taboo in no man's land, he is punished for an unknown sin for which he seeks justification from the superior authorities, but his efforts are viewed as ludicrous or comic despite the underlying sense of tragedy. (5) The Kafkaesque tendency to present tragic situation comically is also explored in Abe's novel. The paper studies the effect of higher authorities exercising their power over man and the inscrutability of cosmic structures continuously undermining human freedom in nightmarish conditions. The paper establishes Kobo Abe in the literary world as a writer who portrays the hollowness and futility of human lives with a Kafkaesque touch.</p>

Introduction

Kafkaesque for Bloom (2010) is an "...an adjective, it describes a quality, and it is almost invariably applied, as here, to a situation" (p. 24). Those works which imitate the characteristics of the works of Kafka are regarded as Kafkaesque. "Kafkaesque is eerie, randomly occurring, too real, yet somehow not real enough. More banally, it is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as 'of or relating to the Austrian writer Franz Kafka (1883–1924) or his writings; resembling the state of affairs or a state of mind described by Kafka'" (Lemon, 2011, p.7). A Kafkaesque work dishes out system generated eeriness, intricacies, and complexities prevailing in the lives of the people.

According to Kundera's model of the Kafkaesque, the character of a Kafkaesque work is unable to come out of the effect of powers of institutions and the whole world seems to him a boundless labyrinth where he is terminally trapped. His whole existence is deprived of meaning as he battles against the system to seek justification for the charges

against him. He gets thwarted because his survival has no value for the authorities. For Kundera, Kafkaesque is characterised by the devolution of the boundary between the public and the private. Intrusion into the privacy of an individual is another hallmark of the Kafkaesque. With the slight intermingling of tragedy and comedy, the Kafkaesque portrays the absurdity and dreadfulness which a character confronts in his life. "There are tendencies in modern history that produce the Kafkan in the broad social dimension: the progressive concentration of power, tending to deify itself; the bureaucratization of social activity that turns all institutions into boundless labyrinths; and the resulting depersonalization of the individual" (Kundera, 1988, p. 93).

Literature Review

Literature is replete with such Kafkaesque works. The Kafkaesque eeriness, the feeling of being trapped in a labyrinth, the violation of privacy and being punished for no sin, are a part and parcel of the totality of human experience. The grand scheme of things under the sun does not take man into the equation. The indifference and dysfunctionality of the cosmos is translated into the human world when it mirrors the inscrutable structure of the cosmos. The cosmos is a labyrinth, so is the world in Kafka, Camus, Beckett etc. One only has to pay attention to the parable "Before the Law" in Kafka's terrifying eyeopener *The Trial*. The punitive demigods of the earth have their own laws, mechanisations and rhetoric. Their indifference and cruelty might even shame the cosmic powers. The universe, arguably, is only biological planned, not morally. There are loopholes in the grand scheme of things. In Beckett's *Endgame*, a very interesting anecdote is shared by Nagg:

An Englishman, needing a pair of striped trousers in a hurry for the New Year festivities, goes to his tailor who takes his measurements. [Tailor's voice] 'that's the lot, come back in four days, I'll have it ready. Good. Four days later. [Tailor's voice] 'so sorry, come back in a week, I've made a mess of the seat'...A week later. [Tailor's voice] 'Frightfully sorry, come back in ten days, I've made a hash of the crutch.'...Ten days later. [Tailor's Voice] 'Dreadfully sorry, come back in fortnight, I've made a balls of the fly.'...[Customer's voice] 'God damn you to hell, sir, no it's indecent, there are limits! In six days, do you hear me, six days, God made the world...and you are not bloody well capable of making me a pair of trousers in three months!' [Tailor's Voice, scandalized] 'But my dear sir, look-[disdainful gesture, disgustedly] at the world- and look [loving gesture, proudly]- at my trousers!' (103).

The tailor's disgusted reaction at the mention of the Biblical story of creation is a comically profound expression of the dysfunctional nature of the universe which in turn suggests the dysfunctional nature of the human world. The universe was created in haste (six days) hence it is imperfect, and three months are less time to stitch a perfect pair of trousers. The analogy between the universe and the trousers is unparalleled in all absurd and existentialist literature except for Hemingway's pristine short story "A Clean Well-Light

Place". Hemingway in the story constructs an analogy between the clean and well-lighted café and the outside world which is unclean, poorly lighted and war torn. The insomniac older waiter of the café keeps the café open till late night because there might be men who need a clean and well lighted café. Dostoevsky, in *The Brothers Karamazov* puts a similar question in a child's mouth when he questions his father as to the source of cosmic light. "The lord created light on the first day, and the sun, moon, and stars on the fourth day. Where did the light shine from on the first day?" (124). It is a question similar to what Vladimir and Estragon ask each other regarding the tree of the Act II. The sprouted leaves on the barren tree of the Act I leaves them questioning the very structure of the universe. Or why does Godot beat the brother who minds the sheep? All these characters experience the arbitrary nature of life and universe like Sartre's Pablo Ibbieta. The universe is only biologically planned not ethically. "If man realized that the universe like him can love and suffer, he would be reconciled" (Camus 20). The viciousness of power's circle has a thick and impenetrable skin like Ionesco's rhinos in *Rhinoceros*. All the important people at the helm of power suffer from what Ionesco called 'rhinocerotitis.'

"The Overcoat" by Nikolai Gogol highlights the powers higher authorities hold and how a simple man experiences unkindness of a hegemonic group. A simple-minded clerk Akaky Akakyevitch, whose name etymologically means 'shoe,' feels as if it was a *fate* that he had to be named so. He is stuck in the labyrinthine world of a Russian government office where the bureaucratic shenanigans escape his understanding. He creates a world of his own where copying letters is only escape. Once his overcoat is stolen, his struggle to get his overcoat back reveals the true face of viciousness of bureaucratic structures.

Methods and Materials

For Kundera a Kafkaesque/Kakfan character, one accused of an unknown crime, is bound to the mysterious system from which he cannot escape. Lemon (2011) also labels such works as Kafkan that contain the qualities of Franz Kafka's works. "Kafkan implies a greater degree of similarity with, and/or the direct, attributable influence of, Kafka's actual works" (p. 207). Kafka's works usually contain unresolved endings in which there are irony and satire on the external forces. Kafka criticizes the world he lives in. "The Kafkan protagonist is torn, in a non-dialectical way, between the worldviews and economies of communal participation and writing" (Susman, 2002, p. 131). This term has been in use for more than 50 years. "The word is an adjective, it describes a quality, and it is almost invariably applied, as here, to a situation" (Thorlby, 2010, p. 24).

For Kundera the adjective "Kafkan" entails five attributes:

1. The world as a huge labyrinthine institution
2. The punishment seeks offense.

3. Man's entire existence is a mistake.
4. Kafkan provokes laughter.
5. Private is public.

In the article, Kundera narrates the true story of a Prague engineer who becomes a victim of the mysterious system when a false news pertaining him is published in a newspaper that the engineer who went to attend a conference in London, disowned his own country and decided to stay in England. When the engineer comes back, he is taken aback after reading such a story attributed to him. The engineer sets out to seek rectification of the false news circling around in Prague. The newspaper editor tells him that he has nothing to do with the news as he received it from Ministry of the Interior who in turn received it from the intelligence people. Hence, the engineer must go to the ministry to seek retraction of the news. The Ministry acknowledges the mistake but cannot retract as it is against their policy. The engineer is told not to worry, but soon he observes that he is being followed and watched along with his other family members. The whole procedure seems to be of a labyrinthine nature for the engineer. He keeps going from one person to another but is unable to get out of this mazy situation. Kundera calls this power a "boundless labyrinthine". Ultimately the engineer is forced to leave his country illegally, making the false story true. The system arranges the events in such a way that a false story turns out to be true.

The engineer is just like the character of Joseph K. in *The Trial* (2017) by Franz Kafka. "He knew he had done nothing wrong, but one morning, he was arrested" (Kafka, 2017, p. 1). The policemen do not give him satisfactory reasons regarding his arrest. Joseph K. protests the unlawful arrests and requests the officers to recheck whether they have the right man or not. He is told the department of justice does not make mistakes, therefore, he must accompany them to the police station. The law/institutions/authorities obey their own internal inscrutable laws which are not compatible to rational human principles.

"The absurdity of the punishment is so unbearable that to find peace the accused needs to find a justification for his penalty: *The punishment seeks the offense*" (Kundera, 1988, p. 91). The statement given about the Prague engineer becomes true when he, after failing to convince the newspaper, the ministry, intelligence agencies to retract the news, finally decides to leave his country. Joseph K. is also the victim of such an indifference system. The novel begins with the arrest of Joseph K. and ends with his execution, and he dies without knowing why. The system reverse the hierarchy tailor-made to achieve its sinister goals. Offense should precede punishment, but in a Kafkaesque/kafkan world, punishment precedes offense. The individual, in a labyrinthine system, struggles in vain to know the crime for which he has been sentenced.

“Man’s physical existence is only a shadow cast on the screen of illusion. They are the shadows of a mistake in the file, shadows without even the right to exist as shadows” (p. 91). For Kundera, Prague engineer and Joseph K. are not criminals rather their punishment is due to the mistake—the mistake of existing. He calls them shadows but they have been denied the right to exist as shadows. They must become what others force them to be. Joseph K happens to be the wrong man at the wrong time at the wrong place.

Comic is bound to the tragic essence of the Kafkaesque. A Kafkaesque situation apparently seems comic but its underlying essence is tragic. When Kafka read out loud the first chapter of *The Trial*, his friends laughed as did Kafka himself. Everyone found the premise to be comic, but for Kundera the Kafkaesque takes us inside the guts of the joke where the true tragic essence of the joke lies. A joke is played on Joseph K., the Prague Engineer and Kundera’s hero Ludvik, but the joke turns into a tragedy very soon.

“The Kafkan is not restricted to either the private or the public domain; it encompasses both. The public is the mirror of the private, the private reflects the public” (p. 96). *The Trial* by Franz Kafka reflects the true picture of the description of the interference of public opinion in Joseph K.’s private life. “Joseph K.’s story also begins with the rape of privacy: Two unknown men come to arrest him in bed. From that day on, he never feels alone. The Court follows him, watches him, talks to him; his own private life disappears bit by bit, swallowed up by the mysterious organization that is always on his heels” (p. 96). Wherever Joseph K. goes, he feels that his happenings are known to others as well. His arrest should have been his private matter but it is known to all the people living in the city. In a Kafkaesque work, “It is not the curse of solitude but the violation of solitude that is Kafka’s obsession!” (p. 96). Joseph K.’s solitude and privacy are violated by the policemen who have the authority to proceed with the case whether legally or illegally. They come abruptly in his room enquiring him. “... You’ll be taken unawares in your bed. They’ll come just as your father and mother used to” (p. 96).

For Kafka, this world we live in is a labyrinth which has an indifferent intertwined structure. It is a boundless labyrinth of systems and laws that follow their own mechanisms. Human nature is unaware of the force programming such rules. “There are tendencies in modern history that produce the Kafkan in the broad social dimension: the progressive concentration of power, tending to deify itself; the bureaucratization of social activity that turns all institutions into boundless labyrinths; and the resulting depersonalization of the individual” (p. 93). In this world, human concerns have no values at all. They are only judged by the partialities of the forces working around them and are often caught up and thrown into the world where escape is inaccessible.

Discussion and Results

In Kobo Abe's *The Woman in the Dunes*, a man becomes the victim of such unfairness like Joseph K. and the Prague engineer. He is a dedicated insect collector who travels to a desert to collect insects from the beetle family. The man is so engrossed in collecting insects that he loses his way in the desert. He is found by certain villagers who take him to their place. As it is going to be dark soon, the man has no option but to accept their proposal. The man is made to stay in the hut of a lonely woman. The villagers trap him there so that the woman could find someone to help her with every day chores. Just like Joseph K. is arrested without any reason, the man in the *Dunes* is imprisoned in the village without his free will just like in *The Trial* Joseph K. remarks, "I was just caught unawares" (Kafka, 2017, p. 17). The man realises, like Joseph K., "There was no escaping the law of the sand" (Abe, 1964, p. 17).

The very first day he applies DDT to his clothes due to the excessive amount of fleas, uses eye medicine, covers his food and asks for water to get the sand off from his body but he is told that there is no water. The sand is unceasing and unrelenting. It continues to pore in to the hut from every side. The man has not encountered such situation before and naturally is very concerned with the environment. Instead, the woman tells him that he will get water the day after tomorrow as if she knows that he is going to be there forever. When he longs for water, she replies, "I'm terribly sorry, but could you put it off until the day after tomorrow?" (p. 25). He replies while laughing, "The day after tomorrow? But I won't be here the day after tomorrow" (p. 25). On another occasion, he tells her, "Don't worry about such things. I'll only be here tonight anyway" (p. 34).

The desert is actually the labyrinth and the old man, woman, movement of sands, missing rope ladder to climb out of the hut and the deep house in which he is forced to live are all the mechanisms of the desert like labyrinth. He feels suspicious in the house that looks half buried where the search for water is impossible. The villagers already know that they have caged a man who will act as a puppet who will act on their plans accordingly. He is dumbfounded after realizing that the sand movement is the same every day. "Shovelling 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...Well, what happens with the River of Hades in the end? "Not a thing. It's an infernal punishment precisely because nothing happens" (p. 188). And shoveling is what he has to do while living there. "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" (p. 39). For a man like him, whose purpose is just the collection of numerous innovative insect types, the environment he is facing and the plans which are decided for him, are intimidating. He starts realizing that his escape will turn out to be a life-threatening act. When he wants to rest, he cannot because he is told that the house would get buried in the sand, so he has to continue this process

again and again in order to prevent the situation. Tired of his ruthless journey, he decides to escape that place but finds no rope ladder which is the only possible way to his escape. "It was unbelievable! The rope ladder had vanished from the place it had been the night before" (p. 46). He screams at his weakness in the face of an indifferent power. After a few days, he formulates more concrete plans against the sand, which is his worst enemy, for escaping this ill-fated place. He plans to shave the ground from the bottom because he thinks that in that way the ground level will get high and ultimately it will result in his escape. But this technique of his does not work out well and the incline remains the same as before.

In his second escape attempt he makes a rope to climb out of the sand pit. "Yet there seemed to be some truth in the law of probability, according to which the chance of success is directly proportionate to the number of repetitions" (p. 170). But in his case, the number of repetitions is directly proportional to his failure because he always fails in his plans. He succeeds; but in complete darkness, he again fails to find his way out of the desert. After a while he finds himself surrounded by village dogs who are ready to pounce at him. "There was no choice. The only thing to do was to make a direct run for the village gates" (p. 194). He is eventually caught by the villagers. "Or maybe they were mindless man-eating plants or avaricious sea anemones, and he was supposed to be a pitiful victim who happened to be in their clutches" (p. 223). He whimpers when he finds himself imprisoned in their web:

He had heard of sand that swallowed people up. He struggled, trying to extricate himself some way, but the more he struggled, the more deeply he sank. His two legs were already buried up to the thigh...Ah! So this was the trap! Their target had not been the sea at all, but here! They intended quite simply to liquidate him without even going to the trouble of capturing him (p. 200).

He is brought back to the woman's house again, and to his dismay realises he has to live there. "But life isn't something one can understand, I suppose" (p. 208). The Kafkaesque attribute of labyrinthine trap is clearly found in this novel because its character remains trapped in the desert like labyrinth. Like Prague engineer, who goes to the editor, Ministry of the Interior and intelligence people one by one to withdraw the news about him, but he finds no way as no one takes responsibility of the published news. "How wonderful it would be if once a day, even for a half hour, he could climb up the cliff and look out over the sea" (p. 227). The events of the novel affirm where there's life, there's always a labyrinth waiting for man to lose his way inside.

In the Kafkaesque world punishment is given without letting the individuals know his offense. An innocent man is held accountable for a crime unknown to him. He thus tries to seek justification for the punishment levied upon him. The system in which a man is caught is so dominant that he finally accepts whatsoever they inflict on him or often he ends up committing the crime which eventually ratifies the genuineness of the punishment

given. "There are only orders and rules. It is a world of obedience" (Kundera, 1988, p. 97). The scenario becomes bizarre as the individual realises that the laws according to which the punishment is given can never be known. The law and the judges hide behind walls which are impenetrable. The hero may wander through the corridors of the courts searching for a friendly face only to end in a desperate failure. The law in itself is a labyrinth. Hence, unsurprisingly, Joseph K. in *The Trial* finds the court building structured like a labyrinth. The nonappearance of influential legal system leads to anxiety and seclusion. Individuals are troubled by the inscrutability of the law. Such is the nature of the institution of law in Kafka's world. "The person punished does not know the reason for the punishment. The absurdity of the punishment is so unbearable that to find peace the accused needs to find a justification for his penalty: *The punishment seeks the offense*" (p. 91). The Prague engineer also seeks his offense. And sometimes, like Prague engineer's case, the offense is sought in the form of a character accepting his punishment, through system's fabrication, by doing something which proves him guilty. *The punishment has finally found the offense* (p. 91). Abe's novel becomes an allegory of cosmic and worldly forces punishing man for nothing.

In Abe's novel, the man at first tries to escape, and after failing, seeks the reasons of his imprisonment and the law by which they are treating him unfairly. Like Joseph K. he hopes that his imprisonment might be a misunderstanding on the part of the villagers:

He could not believe it. Perhaps there was some mistake; it was bound to be a mistake, there was nothing to do but assume that it was a mistake...First of all, there was no point at all in doing what they had done to him. He was not a horse or a cow; they could not force him to work against his will. Since he was useless as manpower, there was no sense in shutting him up within these walls of sand. It simply inflicted a dependent on the woman (p. 51).

The man demands answers from the woman but she remains silent. The man tries to hammer some sense into her and the villagers, "It's no joke! There's a limit to absurdity. This is an illegal detention pure and simple. A fine crime! You don't have to do such senseless things. Any number of men out of work would be glad of the chance for the daily pay" (p. 59). He is as innocent as Joseph K., "Maybe the orders had been given to arrest some house painter-someone who is as innocent as I am, but it was me they chose" (Kafka, 2017, p. 37).

The man in the novel refuses to believe in "a world where people were convinced that men could be erased like chalk marks from a blackboard. In his wildest dreams, he could not have imagined that such barbarism still existed anywhere in the world" (Abe, 1964, p. 67). The man ponders over the irrationality of the universe and the laws governing it, "If a law appeared without reason, like this, what could one believe in?" (p. 206).

For Kafka, the world we live in and the human life we endure, do not make any sense. "It is the world where actions have become mechanical and people do not know the meaning of what they do" (Kundera, 1988, p. 97). We live in a world where our choices are determined by the system, where a person is punished not because he is guilty, but because it has been written in his fate. Kafka's Joseph K. exemplifies it, "Your question, My Lord, as to whether I am a house painter-in fact even more than that, you did not ask at all but merely imposed on me- is symptomatic of the whole way these proceedings against me are being carried out" (2017, p. 35). The existence of man in *The Woman in the Dunes* also seems meaningless. His mistake is that he is a modern man who is a misfit in that village because he has not stumbled upon such complexities of life before. He is accustomed to modern way of living where such mode of life is not seen and where men are affluent. He does not belong to that village, so he finds himself the most agonized man in the world. The complications he faces due to sand make him question the meaninglessness of his existence. "The ceaseless movement that made it inhospitable to all living things" (Abe, 1964, p. 14). The Man's struggle against the sand is a never ending crusade. "He was seized from time to time by hallucinations in which he himself began to move with the flow" (p. 15). The man discovers to his dismay that "there was no escaping the law of the sand" (p. 17). Just like authority in Kafka's world where human laws are incompatible to human lives, the authority in the form of the sand, in Kobo Abe's novel functions accordingly. It is indifferent; and does not correspond to human wishes. The man is out of place in that village surrounded by huge dunes of sand, as man, in general, is out of place in the cosmos to speak from an existential perspective. His existence in the desert, from his perspective, is a mistake but a mistake to the benefit of the system.

Among the difficulties he faces during his period of stay, one is the deficiency of water. He does not even get water to wash his face. Besides water, if he does not continue to shovel the sand, it would soon destroy everything. "Its flow is its life" (p. 27). The sand's unceasing movement is what the woman's children and husband suffered from. She is also the victim of such bitterness of life. The woman has already known its brutality and ludicrousness but still, she is doing the same very routine without any helpless scream as if she has come to know the uselessness of crying over spilt milk. "She had probably spent her whole life down here, without even the memory of a comforting word from anyone" (p. 63). Even though the woman is suffering the same fate as the man, he still cannot feel any sympathy for her or find consolation in the fact that he is not alone. Such is the height of the Man's plight. Everyone is a victim of the pitilessness of the other. Villagers are doing this because they are not getting funds from the government to take proper measures to be safe from the sand's movement. In response to this, they find it easier to get other human beings to work for them against their will instead of indulging in the matter of seeking help from the authorities. Human life has no value for them. The villagers and sand are the agents of the indifferent cosmos. "He could not believe it. Perhaps there was some mistake; it was bound to be a mistake. There was nothing to do but assume that it was a mistake" (p. 51). And the mistake lies in his being the wrong man at the wrong place:

Although he may tell others of his hopes, he doesn't dream of them himself. He thinks of himself as worthless and either fall into masochistic loneliness or, failing that, ultimately becomes suspicious and pious, forever denouncing the eccentricities of others. He longs so much for freedom and action that he can only hate people (p. 80).

Tired of resisting against whatever the villagers have imposed on him and not able to get out of the house, he finally accepts his sufferings and continues to carry out the routine of shovelling sand. "Work seemed something fundamental for man, something which enabled him to endure the aimless flight of time" (p. 158).

When the man and the woman get physically intimate, even then the man is not happy because the sand makes it hard for him to enjoy coitus. The sand particles rub against their bodies and hurt them. The man curses sand and in turn universe's indifference towards man's happiness. Now, instead of getting angry, he laughs at his own conditions. Hence, the Kafkan attribute that "Man's Entire Existence is a Mistake" is clearly seen in the form of the protagonist of the novel encountering the meaninglessness of his existence.

Kafkaesque works are both comic and tragic. Kafka not only portrays the tragedy of human life with gloomy images but also with the intermingling of humor. The comic is what constitutes the real essence of the works of Kafka. Paradoxically, the humorous depiction of the tragic is enhanced by a seemingly comic scenario. When Joseph K. is informed of the presence of two policemen in his room, he gets frightened and is surprised by their behavior of eating his breakfast (Kundera, 1988, p. 92). Joseph K.'s feelings are incompatible to that of the readers. Similarly:

But it's small comfort to the engineer to know his story is comic. He is trapped in the joke of his own life like a fish in a bowl; he doesn't find it funny. Indeed, a joke is a joke only if you're outside the bowl; by contrast, the Kafkan takes us inside, into the guts of a joke, into the horror of the comic (p. 92).

In *The Woman in the Dunes*, the man encounters the tragedy of his life but that tragedy is a source of laughter for the villagers. At the start of the novel information is given about him when he is set to go on the expedition:

One August afternoon a man stood in the railroad station at S-. He wore a grey peaked hat, and the cuffs of his trousers were tucked into his stockings. A canteen and a large wooden box were slung over his shoulders. He seemed about to set out on a mountain-climbing expedition (Abe, 1964, p. 6).

The scene appears to be comic because he has prepared himself for some purposeful tour for finding out the required insects. His appearance seems to be strange to

everyone because “Yet there were no mountains worth climbing in the immediate vicinity” (p. 6).

When he is down in the house he gets a can and shovel, which he thinks are for somebody else, but the woman informs him that there’s not someone else, rather he is the one for whom they have descended these things:

“What’s that? See, there’s somebody else after all.”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake!”

“But somebody just said ‘for the other one.’”

“Hmm. Well, they’re referring to you.” (p. 30).

This exchange is humorous as the man considers the can and shovel for someone else but in reality, he is the one who has to shovel the sands. For the man, it is far from humorous but from the readers’ perspective it might be hilarious. To register his protest the man refuses the food offered by the woman, “It would be ludicrous to eat the meal when he disapproved. Even a bristling dog will drop its tail as soon as it gets a bone” (p. 60). First, he thinks that he is strong enough to survive without food but when appetite teases him, he decides to take the meal. “...putting a piece of plastic over her head, quietly began to eat her own meal under it” (p. 63).

Despite all the conditions he has gone through, he is still hopeful that one day he would escape from this hell. “One day he tried setting a trap to catch crows in the empty space behind the house. He named it ‘Hope’” (p. 211). If the ironical name of the trap does not highlight the horrors of the man’s comic situation, nothing ever will in Kafkaesque style. It is rather an insane activity to hope from the crows to help him out by passing his letters to someone who will come to know the indifference he is suffering in such a miserable place. This tragi-comedy situation in this novel makes it a Kafkaesque work.

In the Kafkan world, private life is public. Whatever a man does, it is always known by the other people, there is no privacy in one’s life. He knows no matter how much he hides, his efforts of making people unaware of his doings will always be unsuccessful. The solitude of a man, that are his private life affairs, is interfered by the institution or people around him (Kundera, 1988, p. 96).

In *The Woman in the Dunes*, the man is also the victim of violation of his privacy by the residents of the village. In the village where he is captured, everyone works as a community and know everything that happens in the lives of people. The villagers, in order to help one of their own, know that the lonely woman needs a man. They kidnap the man

and arrange things in such a way that man is forced to help out the woman. "Oh, illegal detention.... But there's no end to human greed, don't you see? You're a valuable possession for the villagers..." (Abe, 1964, p. 219). Lives of both, the man and the woman, and their doings in that house should be a secretive phenomenon but all is known to every inhabitant of the village. They are being watched from everywhere. "But for a man of thirty, a woman who is only a silhouette is the most dangerous. He could embrace it as easily as embracing himself, couldn't he? But behind her, there were a million eyes" (p. 90). He is afraid of getting intimate to the woman. "They'll know the minute we begin to work. There's always someone watching with binoculars from the fire tower" (p. 146). He is stunned to hear about the watch that the villagers are keeping on them. This intrusion of the public into the private lives of the people, where whatsoever an individual does, is known to the others, is the hallmark of a Kafkaesque/kafkan world governed through panopticon.

The Kafkan attribute "Private is Public" is seen best when the man tries to negotiate with the villagers to find some way of getting him out of that place. He is horrified at the response of the village elder:

"It's, ah... not... ah... absolutely impossible to arrange.... Well, this is just an example, but if the two of you came out front... with all of us watching you... and if you'd go to it... and let us see.... Well, what you want is reasonable enough, so we've all decided... uh... that it's all right..."

"What do you mean, let you see?"

"Well... uh... the two of you... doing it together... that's what we mean" (p. 228-229).

As if the sand was not enough of an intruder, the greedy eyes of the villagers focused on his most intimates moments leave him absolutely disgusted.

Conclusion

Kobo Abe's novel is clearly a Kafkaesque work entailing the five attributes of Kafka's world elaborated by Milan Kundera. It insinuates the enigmatic nature of ruling authorities who treat the individuals as their slaves who have no personal feelings or freedom in any situation. With a slight intermingling of comedy with tragedy, the individuals are portrayed as puppets who are at the mercy of forces exercising their powers around them. Kobo Abe exposes such unfathomable institutions, through the symbolic representation of desert and the village, where man is not free to exercise his freedom of expression, and where he suffers the unknown charges in that boundless labyrinth. Thus, there are systems within systems, and the reproduction of such mechanisms in itself is a labyrinth. The only choice left to man is to wander through the maze of system.

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