

The search for self-achievement: abe's woman in the dunes



In *The Woman in the Dunes* by Kobo Abe, the protagonist Niki Jumpei leaves his work and family behind in search of a new species of beetle. On his search, Niki finds himself trapped in a hole amongst the sand dunes, and he initially tries to escape. He believes that the villagers living above the sand dunes are his captors, and treats escaping the dunes as a competition against them. After inventing a water trap, however, Niki no longer sees the villagers as his rivals, nor does he exhibit any urgency to leave. Through the motifs of competition and illusion, Abe shows that people ought not to pursue recognition but self-achievement, leading modern readers to question the appreciation-based society they live in.

The motif of competition shows through when Niki, striving for success, competes with his co-workers and ends up only feeling less accomplished. When Niki ventures out into the dunes, he considers that his co-workers will “be instinctively jealous of the lucky man who had been freed from this hole” (80). His desire to stir up strife among his colleagues shows how he wants to be acknowledged by others. Indeed, his original goal is to find a new species of beetle, wanting his “efforts [to] be crowned with success” (10). Niki thinks that, in discovering something new, he will feel as though enthroned as royalty, and his co-workers subjugated into lesser citizens. Continuing this analogy, Niki’s supremacy would be recognized by all the nation, and as ruler, he would control their actions. However, despite trying to make himself seem more impressive, Niki actually faces “unbearable self-aversion [that] people other than he had colors other than gray” (97). The more Niki tries to create color in his life, such as embarking on a mysterious journey, the more he loathes himself through comparing himself to others.

He can only “ on the gray canvas of reality zestfully [sketch]... the mere form of this illusory festival” (98). Niki tries to make his life appear zestful, but he can only sketch in the outlines of a more vibrant picture of life. He cannot fill in meaning to his existence, just like how he cannot fill in the lines in the illusion he creates. Furthermore, Niki’s constant want for his colleagues to recognize his “ illusory festival” of accomplishments show how he’s controlled by them. Instead of acting autonomously, Niki chooses to act with consideration to what others might think of him. This contrasts his wish to be crowned with success and to dominate others, because he’s actually the one being ruled over. Rather than pushing him to success, his competitive spirit only furthers his sense of a lack of accomplishment.

Niki’s competitive mindset also extends to his interactions with the villagers, and through the motifs of struggle and illusion reveals that winning is vain. Niki views the villagers as if they were his enemies, wanting to “ make them very sorry” for trapping him in the hole (78). After attempting escape from the hole several times, however, Niki realizes he is 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” (123). The image of coming across another cage while attempting to escape emphasizes the villagers’ control over Niki. His competitiveness led him to treat escaping as a contest against the villagers, so it is ironic that the more Niki pursues freedom from his captors, the less autonomy he has. This shows the hopelessness of ascertaining a goal while one is focused on triumphing over others. In the novel’s imagery, his escaping a crack in the fence only to come upon another entrance to a cage also demonstrates the futility of him ever

becoming the final victor. This is similar to how Niki originally escaped from work and family to gain acknowledgment for finding a species of beetle, but is now in another cage trying to escape and win against the villagers. As Niki runs away from the hole, he realizes that "the more he strain[s], the more he seem[s] to be running vainly, dreamily, in one place" (198). He has been running constantly from one problem to another, but he is never finished with conflicts. There is no true final destination or victory. There will always be one more conflict that awaits him and one more thing to accomplish. Niki recognizes that his efforts to beat the villagers are in vain when he doesn't even request escape anymore, but water, from them. When he is ultimately defeated, he surrenders himself to the woman "as if he were a smooth, flat stone in a river bed" (232). This is a parallel to one of his earlier thoughts, that he is like a "deeply buried rock at the bottom of the current" (80). In this climactic moment, when Niki fails to get something as simple as water from his captors, he realizes his utter defeat. His hope of escape falls as he sees himself deeply buried in a hole he might never be able to leave. Originally, Niki tried to win against his co-workers by trying to find a new species of beetle in order to escape from his feeling of being stuck in a riverbed, but now he is back to his original position; this situation only reinforces that fame is an illusion.

Instead of pursuing recognition, people should work towards self-achievement to gain freedom, as shown through the motif of competition. After Niki fails to procure water from the villagers, and consequently resolves not to pursue recognition, he realizes that if "one were to give up a fixed position and abandon oneself to the movement of the sands, competition

would soon stop” (15). He no longer obstinately opposes the villagers, and instead of trying to control his circumstances, now allows them to happen as they may. Niki builds a trap that was originally meant to capture crows and discovers that it collects water. He thinks “ there wouldn’t be better listeners than the villagers” (239) for him to tell his discovery to. This marks a change in Niki; originally, he thinks of the villagers as his enemies, but now he is willing to share his innovation with them. Niki realizes that, before, the “ village was supposed to be on the side of the executioner” (223), but now “[h]is military map, on which enemy and friendly forces were supposed to be clearly defined, was blurred” (224). The emphasis is no longer on comparing himself to others, but on the satisfaction he himself gains from achieving a goal. If he were simply focused on winning against the villagers now, he wouldn’t want to share the innovation with them. Before, getting water was a competition against the villagers, but this time he has devised his own way to retrieve it. Though Niki “ was still just as much at the bottom of the hole as ever... he felt quite as if he had climbed to the top of a high tower” (235). Niki has found a different type of recognition—and though others may not know of his finding yet, just his knowledge of his accomplishment has given him freedom. Initially, Niki was unable to accomplish anything, but when he stopped competing with the villagers, he was able to innovate a water trap. Originally controlled by his need to be more successful, Niki is now no longer imprisoned.

Niki’s decision to stop competing with others and to to pursue self-achievement liberated him from being controlled by others. In today’s society, those with fame and ambition are often looked upon as superior,

happier people who've escaped boring existences. Even in school, competitive students who receive good grades are looked upon favorably. In reality, they may only be sketching the outlines of their lives filled with empty meaning. Our culture does not place enough emphasis on contentment one receives when competition is no longer a factor. Niki's change in mentality teaches readers the importance of pursuing their own interests, without comparing themselves to others, in order to gain true freedom.