

# *The Cognitive Evolution of Conceptions of Living Space in the Works of Kobo Abe: A Focus on "The Red Cocoon," "The Woman in the Dunes" and "The Ark Sakura"*

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**Abstract:** Spatiality constitutes a significant facet of human perception and understanding of the surrounding world. Japanese existentialist writer Kobo Abe intricately delineates the cognizance of the inhabited living space within his literary works. However, a limited body of research delves into Abe's oeuvre from a spatial perspective. Drawing from the philosophical foundations of existentialist thought on spatiality, this study examines the transformation of Kobo Abe's comprehension of human living space through an analysis of three representative works across his early, middle, and late creative periods: "The Red Cocoon," "The Woman in the Dunes," and "The Ark Sakura." The analysis reveals a discernible progression in Abe's perception of living space. In the early phase of his creative output, Abe exhibits a sense of rootlessness in relation to his inhabited space, perceiving himself as governed and powerless to resist. As his creative phase transitions to the middle period, Abe experiences a sense of constrictive confinement within his living space, leading him to seek limited forms of resistance through escape and interaction with others. In the later creative period, Abe's resistance evolves into a complete desire for isolation from societal space, immersing himself in a personalized realm of living space. However, Abe also acknowledges the impracticality of wholly detaching the individual from pre-existing spatial contexts. Contrasting Abe's progression of understanding with the philosophies of Heidegger and Sartre, it becomes evident that Abe does not consistently adhere to Sartrean ideologies throughout his evolution of thought.

## 1. Introduction

Space, as the fundamental form of material existence, constitutes an important dimension for human existence and literary creation. Since the 20th century, significant research achievements have been made in literary criticism from the perspective of space. However, there is currently a lack of research from a spatial perspective on the works of Japanese writer Kobo Abe. Only in Dr. Ren Li's doctoral thesis "A Study of the 'Self' in Kobo Abe's Novels" (2018) has there been some research from this perspective on Abe's novel "The Woman in the Dunes"[1]. The academic community has already recognized Abe's significant influence from existentialist philosopher Sartre,

as he attempts to reveal the conflicts between the "self" and the "other," the oppression of the external world and social norms on the human psyche, and the quest for freedom and survival. Based on existing literature, it is evident that research on Abe's works from this perspective tends to emphasize the oppression of the "other" from the external world on the individual self, as well as the resistance and struggle undertaken by individuals in pursuit of self. However, the conflict between the "self" and the "other" primarily stems from human perception and understanding of the surrounding world, with spatiality being an important aspect of this perception and understanding. Existentialist philosophy also places great emphasis on the exploration of spatiality. Therefore, the perception of spatiality from an individual perspective is an indispensable aspect of studying Abe's works. This paper attempts to explore the spatial characteristics in Abe's works through an analysis of "The Red Cocoon," "The Woman in the Dunes," and "The Ark Sakura," which are representative and well-known novels from Abe's early, middle, and later periods of creation, respectively. The study of these three works helps to gain insight into Abe's cognitive process of spatiality in the surrounding world throughout his entire creative career, and also facilitates guiding contemporary society in developing a correct understanding of the surrounding world, managing their relationship with the surrounding world, and jointly establishing a harmonious society.

## 2. Exploration of Existentialist Philosophical Perspectives on the Spatiality of the World

In the context of the conflict between the "self" and the "other" in the works of Kobo Abe, scholars widely recognize this conflict as rooted in Sartre's theory of the "other," specifically the notion of the "other as hell." However, Sartre's theory of the "other" is built upon an inheritance from and critique of Heidegger's philosophy. Moreover, within Kobo Abe's 1942 work "Affirmative Critique Based on the Descent of Questions", clear traces of Heidegger's conception of spatiality in the surrounding world can be discerned. Therefore, to delve into existentialist philosophy's perception of spatiality and its influence on Kobo Abe's creative career, an examination of the origins of Heidegger's and Sartre's thoughts on spatiality becomes necessary.

Heidegger and Sartre have some differences in their views on the spatiality of human existence. Heidegger outlines his perspective in his work "Being and Time." He posits that the spatiality of human existence extends beyond physical location, encompassing an existential realm he terms "existential space." For Heidegger, existential space represents the interconnectedness between humans and the world—a place where individuals blend with the world and interpret its significance. He asserts that human spatiality is an open-ended existence, where individuals shape and define their being through interactions with the world. Kobo Abe, in his article "Affirmative Critique Based on the Descent of Questions", explicates the concept of "wandering spaces" in a manner aligned with Heidegger's ideology. Kobo Abe contends that wandering spaces are not inherent but rather derived entities, arising amidst intersecting buildings, expansive structures, and factories [2]. Wandering spaces inherently delineate pathways among these entities, resonating with Heidegger's comprehension of the existence of entities.

In contrast to Heidegger, Sartre posits in his work "Existentialism is a Form of Humanism" that the human spatial existence is a confined and oppressive realm, which he terms as the "predicament of existence." For Sartre, the human sphere of existence is subject to various constraints and influences stemming from social, cultural, and historical factors, all of which curtail individual freedoms and choices. In "Being and Nothingness," Sartre elucidates the boundaries of individual freedom through the example of love. He illustrates that in a romantic context, the pursuer desires to be liked by the pursued while also hoping that the pursued desires to be liked by the pursuer. This anticipation starkly highlights how in the pursuit of personal liberty, the individual inevitably encroaches upon the freedom of others, a fundamental insight aligned with Heidegger's assertion of

interconnectedness within the world. Hence, Sartre advocates for human beings to transcend this predicament by means of free choice and action, thereby forging their own meaning of existence. The majority of Kobo Abe's works subsequent to gaining prominence inherit Sartre's ideology, making this intellectual legacy the cornerstone of scholarly investigations into Kobo Abe's perspective from both the "self" and the "other" standpoints.

In summary, Heidegger conceives the human spatial existence as an open realm of being, wherein individuals shape their existence through interaction with the world. Conversely, Sartre contends that the human spatial existence is a confined and oppressive domain, necessitating the individual's transcendence of this quandary through acts of free choice and action. Due to the profound influence of both existential philosophers, Kobo Abe's perception of spatial existence bears significant resemblance to their ideas. However, across his works from different periods, Kobo Abe's inclination towards the philosophies of the two existentialists varies. The subsequent analysis will expound upon this aspect, drawing on three of Kobo Abe's works from different periods: "The Red Cocoon," "The Woman in the Dunes," and "The Ark Sakura."

### 3. Perception of One's Living Space

"The Red Cocoon" was written by Kobo Abe in 1950 and won the post-war literary award. It is considered one of Abe's representative works. The novel tells a very simple story: as the sun sets in the west, facing countless houses on the street, the protagonist, referred to as "I," has no place to call home. Despite the desperate search for a home, "I" transforms into a cocoon and is placed inside a child's toy box. In this short novel, Abe portrays a living space that completely rejects the protagonist's existence, namely, the street "with so many houses." On this street, "I" has freedom of movement but cannot find a place to belong, as all the "homes" reject and exclude "I." Faced with rows of homes that are not their own, "I" feels lost, bewildered, and even exhausted. The street, as a living space, symbolizes the surrounding world as perceived by Abe at that time. In 1945, following Japan's defeat in the war and surrender, the puppet Manchukuo government collapsed, and the city of Shenyang, where Abe resided, fell into a state of chaotic anarchy. Amidst the chaos of looting and burning, Abe realized that as an aggressor, even though he grew up in Shenyang, he could never truly possess this "homeland"; he was expelled from this "homeland." In 1946, Abe and his family boarded a ship and returned to Japan, their true homeland. However, due to their prolonged stay on the Chinese mainland, they were rejected by the people around them and struggled to integrate into Japanese society for a long time, experiencing extreme poverty and displacement[3]. This experience became the source of inspiration for "The Red Cocoon," where the street described in the novel reflects Abe's subjective perception of a surrounding world that completely rejects him at that time.

In 1962, Abe wrote "The Woman in the Dunes," marking the maturity of his literary creation. The novel tells the story of a male teacher who, in order to temporarily escape his mundane daily life, goes to the sand dunes by the seaside to collect insect specimens and unexpectedly discovers a small village surrounded by sand. Deceived by the locals, the man is imprisoned in a sand hole and spends his days with a widow, forced to become labor for clearing sand. In his spare time from forced labor, the man desperately contemplates ways to escape but repeatedly fails. Gradually, he becomes assimilated into the life within the sand hole and eventually gives up his escape after discovering how to make a water reservoir. In this novel, Abe depicts two seemingly different but essentially converging living spaces: the sand hole and modern society. The sand dunes village is like a tightly tied sandbag, with a closed terrain that makes it difficult for the villagers inside to connect with the outside world. The sand hole where the protagonist is deceived into is also a closed space surrounded by sand walls. Furthermore, the sand dunes village faces the threat of sand, and if

the sand is not cleared daily, the village risks being buried. This is the fundamental reason why the protagonist and other passers-by are deceived into the sand hole and forced into labor. Within the enclosed sand hole, the protagonist's life with the widow becomes monotonous and meaningless as they labor day after day. However, the sand hole created by Abe is not a separate world isolated from modern society. The concept of the "Möbius strip" is mentioned in the novel, connecting the monotonous, primitive, and even barbaric life inside the sand hole with the material abundance, modernity, and highly civilized life outside in the urban area. The towering sand walls inside the sand hole symbolize the invisible, normative walls constructed by the established rules of the outside world. The confinement of the protagonist in the sand hole also represents the imprisonment imposed by the invisible social rules in the external world. Under this confinement, the protagonist is labeled with various derogatory terms by the people around him, lacking recognition and understanding. It is precisely because of this that he comes to the sand dunes village, seeking temporary escape. It can be said that the sand hole represents the physical confinement of the individual, while the walls of societal rules in modern society represent the confinement of one's spirit. Whether outside the sand hole or inside it, the protagonist consistently feels a strong sense of constraint in the living space he occupies, and even a sense of oppression emanating from the living space itself.

Published in 1984, "The Ark Sakura" is a representative work of Kobo Abe's later novels. In this novel, Kobo Abe constructs an "ideal haven" detached from human society. The protagonist, Mole, perceives the world to be under the constant threat of nuclear warfare, anticipating the imminent outbreak of a nuclear war. Thus, within an abandoned mine, he ingeniously utilizes pilfered resources to establish a nuclear-proof refuge which he dubs the "ark." After recruiting several crew members, the "ark" falls victim to an incursion by the "Broom Brigade." Infighting and power struggles ensue among the crew members, rendering the "ark" a haven fraught with internal crises even before it sets sail. Ultimately, Mole detonates explosives, escaping the refuge he meticulously erected. Serving as the primary space for the crew's activities, the "ark" is nearly isolated from the external world. Its constructor, Mole, connects numerous small caverns within the abandoned mine, each designated for distinct functions. Notably, amidst his extensive preparations, the most paradoxical feature of the "ark" is its extensive and intricate defense systems. These mechanisms are formidable enough to inadvertently cause the demise of any newcomer, including Mole himself. This reflects the fundamental motive behind his establishment of the "ark": to dissociate from the tangible world and attain self-sufficiency. However, this unattainable "ideal haven" cannot sever its ties with the external world. Primarily, the "ark" is not a product of Mole's whims but rather founded upon an external premise: the imminent eruption of nuclear warfare leading to global annihilation. In this sense, the "ark" remains closely linked to the outside world. Additionally, at the outset of the novel, it is elucidated that Mole frequents the provincial city every month to procure supplies and search for suitable "crew members" for embarkation, dispensing them with "survival tickets." For Mole, the initiation of the "ark's" voyage necessitates not just ample resources for subsistence but also the presence of cohabiting crew members. Others constitute a pivotal facet of the encompassing world. Consequently, the connection between an individual and the world cannot be severed once others, aside from the self, come into play. Despite the apparent physical isolation of the "ark," it remains inextricably tied to the world's interconnectedness. This factor is the fundamental rationale behind Mole's eventual abandonment of the "ark." The introduction of others into the ark disrupts the self-contained haven Mole envisioned. From this, it can be seen that in the later stage of creation, Kobo Abe faced a contradictory mentality of living space: not only hoping to be independent from this living space, but also clearly understanding that individuals cannot completely sever their connection with this space.

Thus, the examination of the three representative works of Kobo Abe reveals discernible

distinctions in his portrayal of human living spaces. In "The Red Cocoon," the living space of the "self" is entirely synonymous with the surrounding world, leaving the alienated "self" without a place to belong, stranded in a state of exile. Only through the complete renunciation of the self can one find a place. In "The Woman in the Dunes," the male protagonist transitions from the mental enclosure of modern society to the physical confinement of the sandpit, constantly grappling with the constraints of his living space and attempting to rebel against it. In "The Ark Sakura," the "ark" constructed by Mole represents a living space nearly estranged from the modern external society. Within it, Mole explores the possibility of solitary survival, yet this endeavor ultimately ends in failure. To sum up, Kobo Abe's perception of living spaces unfolds as a progression: from wandering without a place of belonging, to feeling confined and attempting to escape, and finally, the paradox between the desire to flee and the inability to do so.

#### 4. Cognition of Social Space in Relation to Others

Humans are inherently social beings, and thus, their perception of their living space largely comes from the social space formed by their interactions with others. In the literary works of Kobo Abe, a prominent existentialist writer dedicated to unveiling the irrationality of modern society, the perception of living space is intricately intertwined with an understanding of social space.

In "The Red Cocoon," the notion of "home" serves as a symbol of self-belonging, while the protagonist's search for their place is profoundly impacted by the words and actions of others. The woman's obstruction and the bench's expulsion prompt the protagonist to swiftly negate the possibility of those places being their "home," without even a hint of resistance. In the latter part of the novel, as the weary protagonist metamorphoses into a cocoon, a sense of relief emerges as they finally find solace in their newfound ability to rest and rejoice in the assurance that they won't be expelled again. However, the cocooned protagonist is gifted to a child by an anonymous man and placed inside a toy box. Thus, while it seems the protagonist has finally found a place of belonging, it's crucial to note that this is achieved at the cost of self-annihilation, echoing the novel's sentiment, "Having a home, but losing the self that should be at home."<sup>[4]</sup> Kobo Abe's critique in this work revolves around the idea that in the contemporary society, maintaining an absolute sense of self cannot be reconciled with the social space, and only through self-annihilation can integration be achieved. Therefore, it can be inferred that in the early stages of his literary career, Kobo Abe's perception of social space was characterized by a struggle to define his own position within it, attempting to entirely conform or even surrender to this space.

However, in his subsequent work, "The Woman in the Dunes," Kobo Abe's understanding of social space undergoes a notable transformation. Through the male protagonist of this work, a clear resistance to the constraints of social space becomes evident. Within his urban life, various speculations arise from those around him regarding his disappearance, ranging from illicit relationships to suicidal tendencies. While some note the protagonist's hobby of collecting insect specimens, they hastily attribute it to a "mother complex," a means of channeling unsatisfied desires, or even labels such as "possessive," "extremely exclusionary," "petty thief," and "homosexual." Even within his own family, the protagonist fails to garner understanding from his wife. Their perspectives on the essence of marriage diverge significantly. The protagonist idealistic, his wife pragmatic. As a result, the protagonist embarks on a quest to the sand dunes to find new species, momentarily escaping the urban social space in search of self-worth. However, upon being lured into the sand hole and leaving urban life behind, the protagonist exhibits a noticeable sense of nonconformity within the new social space. Despite being far removed from the city, his thoughts and language continue to reflect the legal principles of modern urban life, failing to grasp the ineffectiveness of the laws within the sand village. He vocally proclaims his rights under the law,

but his words fall on deaf ears. Confronted with this predicament, he once again develops a desire to escape, translating it into action. However, during the process of planning and executing his escape, through his interactions with a woman and exchanges with villagers, the protagonist gains insights into the plight of the sand village. Gradually, he realizes that life both inside and outside the sand hole fundamentally converges, embodying the inherent meaninglessness of everyday existence. Paradoxically, after acknowledging this, the protagonist progressively adapts to life within the sand hole. Engaging in daily labor, he experiences a subtle sense of contentment. Further, upon discovering a water reservoir by chance, he finds joy and a renewed sense of purpose. He dedicates himself to studying the principles of the water reservoir, leading to days of fulfillment and satisfaction, ultimately forsaking his initial escape plans. Consequently, during this period, Kobo Abe's perception of social space is marked by a sensation of oppression, fueling a desire to escape the confines of this social space. However, he also recognizes that this escape only amounts to moving from one "sand hole" to another, prompting him to engage in interactions with others, thus reevaluating and seeking his inherent value within the societal space.

In the later stage of his creative career, Kobo Abe undergoes another shift in his perception of social space in his work "The Ark Sakura." In this piece, a heightened sense of rebellion against the established social spaces reaches its zenith. The desire to detach oneself from this spatial confinement becomes palpable, leading to the creation of a new space almost isolated from the external societal realm. The term "Ark" signifies an "ideal homeland" constructed according to the personal will of the protagonist, Mole. Despite initially considering the recruitment of a crew in his plans for the "Ark," Mole's aspiration lies in self-sufficiency, self-contained cycles, and a life devoid of external collaboration. Consequently, for Mole, the crew merely constitutes an adjunct to his pursuit of freedom. In other words, his freedom isn't founded upon respecting fellow crew members; instead, he regards them as possessions, extensions of his role as the captain. Mole yearns for authority, manipulates women, and envisions others living within the "Ark" according to his volition. Subsequently, the "Ark" falls prey to a comprehensive invasion by the "Broom Brigade," and Mole's leadership is superseded and stripped away by the Shadow Vice-Captain and Insect Merchants. The development of the "Ark" no longer adheres to Mole's desires, prompting him to decisively ignite explosives, flee amid the chaos, and relinquish the "Ark" he had painstakingly constructed over the years. It can be argued that Mole resides entirely within a self-contained mental realm, akin to the "Ark" he fashioned, nearly severed from the external social sphere. Following his escape from the "Ark," the outside world no longer resembles the one he once recognized. Everything becomes transparent, evanescent. He disengages from the original societal space, enters the "Ark" with only a few crew members, then flees from the societal space within the "Ark," ultimately achieving detachment from the societal space of the entire world. Nonetheless, an absolute freedom devoid of any responsibility equates to absolute void. Consequently, everything becomes transparent, elusive, and the sought-after freedom loses its significance. From this work, one can also discern the internal contradictions within Kobo Abe: he explores the possibility of breaking free from the existing social space and independent survival, yet he is keenly aware that the societal space is constituted by the interactions among individuals. While pursuing personal freedom, one unavoidably impinges on the freedom of others. Therefore, the realization of absolute personal freedom remains unattainable.

By analyzing the portrayal of social space in Kobo Abe's works across different periods, one can glimpse his evolving perception of social space throughout his creative journey. This evolution spans from social space's absolute dominion over the individual, where the individual is powerless to resist, to social space inflicting psychological persecution on the individual, with the possibility of limited resistance through interactions with others, to an endeavor to sever all ties with the societal space and establish an enclosed space exclusive to the self, while recognizing the inherent

emptiness of such a conception.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the works of Japanese author Kobo Abe, including "The Red Cocoon," "The Woman in the Dunes," and "The Ark Sakura" this study examines the concept of spatiality from the perspective of existentialist philosophers Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre. The research reveals a significant transformation in Abe's understanding of human living space over different periods of his career.

In the early stage of his writing, Abe experienced a sense of displacement and loss in his own living space. The social space, which constitutes an important part of the living space and involves interpersonal interactions, exerted absolute dominance over individuals, leaving them powerless to resist. In the middle stage of his career, Abe felt a sense of confinement and attempted to seek limited resistance through escape and interaction with others. In the later stage, Abe's resistance turned into a complete isolation from the social space, immersing himself in a self-exclusive living space. However, Abe also realized the impossibility of completely detaching oneself from the existing space, making his idealistic notion impractical.

By comparing Abe's understanding process with Heidegger's concept of "existential space" and Sartre's notion of "existential dilemma," it becomes evident that Abe did not strictly adhere to Sartre's ideology throughout his career. In the early stage, Abe experienced the aftermath of war and displacement, making it difficult for him to integrate into the Japanese society upon his return. Consequently, he felt more restricted and expelled within his living space, aligning with Sartre's perspective. However, as time went on, Abe recognized the inseparable connection between individuals, leading him to seek limited freedom and self-value through interaction with others while still harboring a desire to escape the existing living space. Ultimately, Abe yearned for an unrealistic living space detached from the social realm, leaving a sense of regret and melancholy.

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