

## Symbolism of the Mask in Japanese Literature: Abe, Mishima and Enchi

Fuji CHAMBERLAIN AM

“The mask contains the magic of illusion  
without which man is unable to live.”<sup>(1)</sup>

The mask has appeared in many different societies from primitive to sophisticated modern times. It was employed in the ritual life of early man, who used it to transcend the barrier between the natural and the supernatural, between life and death. By donning a mask, he could change his identity, and take on the personality of whatever demon or god the mask represented. Those who observed him also believed in his mask; to them mask and supernatural being were an inseparable entity.

Down the ages the mask has been a favorite theatrical device - for concealment or to represent the multiplicity of aspects of human life. The exploitation of the aesthetic and psychoanalytical potential in the Noh drama is a notable example. In other forms of literature, too, the wearing of a mask frequently appears as the major theme of a story or as imagistic device. Authors like Oscar Wilde, Edgar Allan Poe, and Guy de Maupassant have paid special attention to the mask in their creative writing.<sup>(2)</sup>

Japanese literature also provides some interesting instances in the novel of Abe kōbō (1924-1993), Mishima Yukio (1925-1970), and Enchi Fumiko (1905-1986). In telling a story or dramatizing a human conflict, a writer may use a mask in various ways, and place varying interpretations on its significance. We can interpret the whole range of human experience in the language of the mask. Abe Kobo in *the Face of Another* (1964)<sup>(3)</sup>, Mishima Yukio in *Confessions of a Mask* (1949)<sup>(4)</sup>, and Enchi Fumiko in *A Woman's Mask* (1958)<sup>(5)</sup> employ the mask-theme in different ways, though there are significant parallels.

*The Face of Another* evolves as a description of an individual's inability to face the reality surrounding him and the conflict arising between it and the image of reality he forms through the mask he has made. It is a science fiction work, purporting to be the hero's confession to his wife, which he sets forth in three notebooks distinguished by three colors - black, white and gray. Though these colors appear to have no significance and to have been assigned quite haphazardly, their use illustrates the author's characteristic liking for the use of color, odor, and

forms for atmosphere.

The hero in this novel has had his face cruelly disfigured as a result of a laboratory explosion. He resolves to make a mask in order to give himself a new face. Calling on the technical knowledge he gathered during a medical course, Abe describes the making of the mask in some detail, if not very convincingly, but he does convey a clear impression of the production of a painstaking work of art and a technological triumph.

In Abe's other celebrated works, e.g. *The Woman in the Dunes* (*Suna no Onna*), 1962, and *The Ruined Map* (*Moetsukita Chiizu*) 1967, the plot revolves around the hero's abscondence - into the village of the sand dunes or the maze of a disordered big city. In this story the hero seeks to abscond from reality. He does not take to flight physically but he escapes from his own personality. Abe is here exposing the disguise we assume in every day life. The mask is a disguise behind which the hero hides to protect himself against his fear of reality, and to pacify his inner turmoil. The mask he has fashioned gives him the imaginary power to create his own identity and thus to manipulate his own destiny.

In a confessional passage, he says: "I hid behind my mask, which had neither name nor status nor age, elated at the security guaranteed me alone."<sup>6</sup> Abe had several reasons for leaving his main character nameless. One is the first-person story-telling technique employed: another is that without a name, a man remains unknown, and therefore becomes universal man. He is also faceless, and thus cannot be identified.

The hero in *Confession of a Mask* does not construct a mask to wear but disguises himself in costume assembled from his mother's clothes chest.

"From among my mother's kimonos I dragged out the most gorgeous and gaudily designed one. For sash I chose an *obi*, on which scarlet roses were painted in oil, of a Turkish pasha. I covered my head with a wrapping-cloth, of crepe-de-chine. My cheeks flushed with wild delight when I stood before the mirror and saw that this improvised headcloth resembled those of the pirates in *Treasure Island*.

But my work was still far from complete. My every joint, down to the very tips of my fingernails, had to be made worthy of the creation of mystery. I stuck a hand mirror in my sash and powdered my face lightly. Then I armed myself with a silver-colored flashlight, an old-fashioned fountain-pen of chased metal, and whatever else struck my eyes. I assumed a solemn air and, dressed like this, rushed into my grandmother's sitting-

room. Unable to suppress my frantic laughter and delight, I ran about the room crying: 'I am Tenkatsu! Me, I'm Tenkatsu!'" (7)

The boy enjoys masquerading in bizarre costumes, satisfying his childhood passion for impersonation. His passion for dressing-up becomes progressively stronger as he begins to frequent the theatre and cinema. At various points in his life he fancies himself becoming a night soil collector, or a prince in European fairy tales, Cleopatra, a handsome knight in a poem by Oscar Wilde, or a soldier smelling of sweat.

Although in the first part of the novel, the hero is portrayed as a young boy, his motivations are analyzed as those of a youth, attempting to cope with sexual insecurity and perversion. The major theme seems to be the struggle within his soul of its propensities for good and evil. He begins the story with an epigraph from Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* as follows:

"Beauty is a terrible and awful thing! It is terrible because it never has and never can be fathomed, for God sets us nothing but riddles. Within beauty both shores meet and all contradictions exist side by side. . . . .  
Beauty! I cannot bear the thought that a man of noble heart and lofty mind sets out with the ideal of the Madonna and ends with the ideal of Sodom. What's still more awful is that the man with the ideal of Sodom in his soul does not renounce the idea of Madonna, and in the bottom of his heart he may still be on fire, sincerely on fire, with longing for the beautiful ideal, just as in the days of his youthful innocence. . . ." (8)

Although the title of the novel is *Confessions of a Mask*, the word "mask" occurs only twice in the story. But the whole novel itself is a masked confession. It is clearly the story of Mishima's own life: he even uses the name "Kō-chan",<sup>(9)</sup> which is part of his own name, to distinguish the hero. The characters in the novel, moreover, are also modeled on the members of his own family. True, Mishima later denied that this novel was his autobiography, asserting it was pure fiction illustrating his paradox-packed philosophy of life. However, although it would be dangerous to interpret every event in the novel as directly derived from some incident in Mishima's past life, the parallels are so overwhelming as to stamp it incontrovertibly as a spiritual autobiography.

In both stories, the heroes go to some lengths to produce a mask or a costume. The former attempts to describe an authentic technology: the latter characteristically combines aesthetic

fantasy with a shattering reality. Whereas the hero of *Confessions of a Mask* gains pleasure from his impersonations, the hero of *The Face of Another* is tormented with fear as to what other people's reactions to his mask will be. For him the mask is a desperate and serious attempt to solve his problems, to fulfill his need for a new identity, and he is in a state of constant anxiety lest the new identity he has attained through the mask somehow disintegrates.

Most writers select as their focal point a character or persona representing a type of personality appropriate to the kind of theme or situation presented in the novel. This persona may be that of the author himself revealed in all its manifold complexities or that of a totally different independent character he creates.

Abe's *persona*, as we have seen is nameless, faceless, and of unspecified age and status, i.e. any man. On the other hand, for Mishima, the name of the *persona*, its status, and social functions are considered important, regardless of what these may be, whether exalted or lowly. Mishima attempts to create the *persona*, "I", as the hero of a confessional and autobiographical novel, but at the same time he treats the story as fiction, as if an actor were playing him on the stage. By this device, he can transform reality into unreality, and abnormality into normalcy.

Abe's works reflect an almost compulsive desire to find some sure reality, and to show that man's reliance on any kind of assumed personality to insure his spiritual survival will lead him to disaster. In other words, belief in the mask is a great illusion.

To Mishima, the conflict between the two opposed aspects of human existence: beauty and ugliness, sin and punishment, youth and old age, is of supreme importance. Through the device of the mask, Mishima tries to lure us to a deeper insight into our innermost selves. He attempts to probe beneath outward appearances to unveil the subconscious perplexities of men, thus confronting fiction with fact, unreality with reality. Beauty is consequently often seen as a subtle camouflage for an ugly and beastly character.

Enchi Fumiko held a similar belief in the coexistence of beauty and ugliness in human nature. But her treatment of the mask-theme is quite different from Abe's and Mishima's. She exploited the mysterious power of the Noh mask, which she considers to possess subtle symbolism, the appeal of the esoteric, and a delicate formalism. The Noh mask was a favorite motif with her; two other novels bear the titles *Futa Omote* ( *Twin Masks* ) 1954, and *Kamen no Sekai* ( *The World of a Mask* ) 1963. In *A Woman's Mask* the still beauty of the heroine seems to radiate the mysterious power of the Noh mask.

"The features of Mieko's face do not make any vivid impression on Ibuki, although he has met her on a number of previous occasions. Her face shows only a soft white outline. Her motionless face reminds him

somewhat of the female masks in the Noh drama, where all expression is indiscernible.

Ibuki then, wonders why her face does not show any expression, despite her many misfortunes in her marriage and the loss of her only son. Since Mieko, too, is a living person like any other living woman, who smiles and weeps, why doesn't her face show any expression in the changes of her emotional state."<sup>(10)</sup>

Enchi thus presents the heroine Mieko, not just as the *persona* of the story but also as an abstraction of the female being, and as an incarnation of an archetypal mask, or pattern of the very essence of the Noh mask itself.

Further, Enchi employs Noh masks as symbols to describe the physical and emotional characteristics of the heroine. Thus, she indirectly compares Mieko with *Ryō no Onna* ( a mask called "Female Ghost" ) or with *Fukai* ( a mask called "Deep Well" ). Every gesture, every movement, every appearance of Mieko suggests the technique of the masked protagonist in the Noh play and the characters seem to be viewed through the eyeless sockets of a Noh mask hanging on the wall, like puppets moved by some mysterious power emanating from it.

But, if Mieko is the personification of the mask, what type of woman is she? In the story Mieko writes an essay entitled *Legend of the Shrine in the Field* ( *No no Miyaki* )<sup>(11)</sup> based on *The Tale of Genji*, in which she explores the relationship of the shamanistic Lady Rokujō with the handsome Prince Genji. In this way, Enchi tries to establish a twofold relationship of a mask within a mask between herself and Mieko, and Mieko and the Lady Rokujō. Here again emerges a similarity with Mishima's technique in *Confessions of a Mask* for Enchi's heroin is the image of the authoress herself, and at the same time an authoress of a story about a fictional character (e. g. The Lady Rokujō).

It is interesting to note that Mishima also has employed the elements of the Noh drama in his many novels and plays. One of his modern Noh plays, *Aoi no Ue* ( Lady Aoi )<sup>(12)</sup> is based on the same theme taken from *The Tale of Genji* and the Noh drama, *Aoi no Ue*, as the motif in *Female Mask*, particularly related to its episode of Lady Rokujō in *The Legend of the Shrine in the Field*.

Naturally Mieko's views on Lady Rokujō reflects Enchi's own. Mieko acts as a catalyst moulding together Enchi as a modern writer with Rokujō, the shaman.

She also combined in this story the elegance of *The Tale of Genji* with the dramatic technique of the Noh. This dramatic technique assists Enchi in giving mysticism and shamanism

credibility in a modern setting.

Further, images taken from classical literature convey the perverted sensuality of the contemporary man/woman relationship, even to the point of portraying sadistic and masochistic illusions. It has often been pointed out that this is where Enchi's characteristic style of writing bears similarities to that of Mishima Yukio.

Enchi's heroin is a woman whose strong ego prevents her from being completely dominated by the men to whom she is strongly attracted physically, and who at the same time hates men spiritually, and eventually takes revenge on them. The heroin is inwardly tormented by emotional conflicts, but retains a surface calm with her mask-like expression. Though she takes no overt initiative, nevertheless, as a medium, she exerts a witch-like power over other people's souls, forcing them finally to submit to her will. The *mise en scene* seems to resemble a Noh stage, with the characters' involvement in seances suggesting the dreamlike configurations Noh performers move through.

Interestingly, Abe also brings a reference to the Noh play into his novel. The hero accidentally comes upon an exhibition of Noh masks in a department store on his way to eat in one of its restaurants. Abe depicts the hero's half-dismay at being confronted by the display:

“I stepped off the elevator, into an exhibition area behind the restaurant. The words from a huge sign suddenly leapt out at me: EXHIBITION OF NOH MASKS. I stood for an instant rooted to the spot and then began to back away in confusion.”<sup>(13)</sup>

Then, after a momentary hesitation, he walks straight through the exhibition to the restaurant. He feels tense, and eventually changes his mind and forces himself to take a quick look at it. He says:

“A masked man looking at Noh masks is an unusual combination. If necessary, I was prepared to jump through a hoop of fire.”<sup>(14)</sup>

While he was making a round of the exhibits, he then thought:

“There was a big difference between a Noh mask and the mask I sought. I needed something to clear the obstruction of the scars and restore the roadway for other people, while the Noh mask rather seemed bent on rejecting life. The mouldy smell that filled the exhibition room, for example, a sort of atmosphere of decadence, was good proof of that.”<sup>(15)</sup>

Sorell comments:

“The mask is the invisible bridge leading from man’s hidden being to the daily aspects of his world. It is his protective mask.”<sup>(16)</sup>

This points out the difference in significance of the mask in Abe’s and Enchi’s stories. To Abe the mask is necessary for the hero to be able to communicate with others. To Enchi the mask seems to be used to shut off communication with others almost entirely. Abe’s mask displays a new identity he hopes others will acknowledge. Enchi’s heroine hides her emotions so as to render herself a complete enigma. Abe writes:

“There was a kind of refined beauty in the Noh mask, what we call beauty is perhaps the strength of our feeling of resistance to destructibility ..... the mystery is that man has to seek such rare refinement.”<sup>(17)</sup>

Abe’s viewpoint on beauty seems more realistic than the concept of absolute beauty Mishima and Enchi hold. Abe looks at the mask from a practical point of view rather than one of mysticism. He says:

“The demand for a mask practically speaking, stems from a desire on the part of those who are not satisfied with, who want something more than, a mere living actor’s expression. If this were not true what would be the need of deliberately stifling expression?”<sup>(18)</sup>

Enchi interprets the mask with great psychological subtlety, touching on eternal and universal truths. Abe gives a detailed scientific analysis of the woman's mask exhibited in the Noh display:

“The woman’s mask, though it seemed fleshy, on closer inspection revealed the basic skull. The seams of the bones in the brow, forehead, cheeks, and lower jaw stood out in relief with an exactness that made one think of an anatomical chart; and the shadows of the bones, following the movement of the lights, emerged as expression.”<sup>(19)</sup>

Enchi’s description is more artistic or romantic, as we see the following scene where a

mask is displayed by one of the characters to some visitors:

“The forehead and cheeks of the woman’s mask are very fleshy and rounded. Her eyes, with upper eyelids curved into a crescent shape, and her lips, half opened slightly showing her teeth, appear to give an impression of a faint smile. The mask seems to conceal an elusive and subtle ingenuity that is able to change its smiling expression into a weeping one.”<sup>(20)</sup>

Thus in these three novels the mask theme is developed in divergent ways, but they all exhibit the extraordinary fascination of the Japanese psyche with impersonation, disguise, and concealment.

## NOTES

- (1) Walter Sorell, *The Other Face : The Mask in the Arts*, (Barnes & Noble Books, London, 1973) p. 16.
- (2) Sorell, p.21.
- (3) *The Face of Another (Tanin no Kao)* was originally published in 1964, and the English translation by E. Dale Saunders was first published in America, 1966.  
安部公房、「他人の顔」日本の文学 (*Japanese Literature*) Vol. 73, 中央公論, 1998.
- (4) *Confessions of a Mask ( Kamen no Kokuhaku )* was published in 1949. Its translation by Meredith Weatherby was first published in London in 1960.  
三島由紀夫、「仮面の告白」、新潮文庫 (122刷) 2000.
- (5) *A Woman’s Mask ( Onnamen )* was first published in a literary journal, *Gunzō*, (*The Reflections of the People*) in 1958. Later published by Kodansha Publishing Company in the same year.  
円地文子、「女面」、新潮文庫 (54刷) 1998.
- (6) Abe, p.145
- (7) Mishima, p. 17-18. “*Tenkatsu*” (天勝) was a stage name of a popular magician in those days.
- (8) Mishima, p. 1.
- (9) Mishima Yukio’s true name is Hiraoka Kimitake. The hero’s name (公ちゃん), appears to be taken from the first part of his given name “Kimitake” (公威), which is the Chinese pronunciation of the same character “公”. (Mishima Yukio, *Mishima Yukio-shu, The Zenshū (New Selected Modern Japanese Literature, Complete Collection)*, vol. 31, (Tokyo,1960)
- (10) Enchi Fumiko, *Onnamen (A Woman’s Mask)*, (Tokyo,1966), p. 116.
- (11) Lady Rokujō or (*Aoi no Ue*) is a Noh play based on the heroin in *The Tale of Genji*, a beautiful, elegant princess, hopelessly in love with Prince Genji.

---

(12) Mishima Yukio, *Kindai Noh-gaku-shū* (Five Modern Plays), (Tokyo,1956). Its English translation by Donald Keene,(New York: knopf,1956).

(13) Abe, p.66.

(14) Abe, p.66.

(15) Abe,p.66-67.

(16) Sorell, p.14.

(17) Abe, p.67.

(18) Abe, p.67.

(19) Abe, p.68.

(20) Enchi, p.31.

Nakamura Yasuo, NOH, The Classical Theater translated by Don Kenny with an Introduction by Earle Ernst, Performing Arts of Japan: IV, Weatherhill-Tankosha, Tokyo,1971.