

**In the act of performance: Where is the “self”?**

Gender, like any artistic expressions, is a performance. There lies the long-existing distinction between sex and gender that sex is biological whereas gender is culturally constructed. Butler argues that if the so-called “sex” is as culturally constructed as gender, perhaps “sex” has already been gendered, leading to the collapse of demarcation between sex and gender (Butler, “Critically Queer”, p. 7). With its substantive metaphysical discourse, gender has turned out to be a performance, constituting its gender identity (Butler, “Critically Queer”, p. 25). In *Confession of a Mask*, the male protagonist Mishima acts as a masculine man who is interested in women to conceal his homosexuality. Throughout different phases of his life, he attempts to conform to social norms by putting his “mask” on. The “mask” symbolizes his fake/counterfeit gender identity, the pretense of being a heterosexual. By confessing of the mask as the title suggests, he unveils/uncovers his homosexual identity that he does not dare to confront, resulting in melancholia. He feels guilty, painful, shameful, a heightened sense of loss. Torn between the boundaries between heterosexuality and homosexuality, he cannot stand the culmination of melancholia in which his “self” or subjectivity is pathologically “abjected”. The existence of “self” has become an enigma in the end.

The novel *Confession of a Mask* is an autobiography of Mishima expressing his homosexual life. Interestingly, Mishima is a pen name. The homosexual life presented in *Confession of a Mask* is open to doubts. It might not be entirely true/real at all. This questions the credibility of the narrator of *Confession of a Mask*. Homosexual life of Mishima might be real or performative, true or fake, constructed in homosexuality or heterosexuality. It triggers off the complex, double-d identification with the “self”, in Mishima’s performativity act of his homosexual life.

Mishima’s childhood has been through the “sensitization” whereby Mishima transgresses his marginality to avert anxiety by deliberately exhibiting masculinity. “Sensitization” is a stage before puberty during which the child feels marginalized and being different from others of the same-sex. (Troiden, “A Model of Homosexual Identity Formation”, p. 266) Like Joan Riverie in her article “Womanliness as a Masquerade” published in 1929 who raises out womanliness found in intellectual woman is a masquerade of ‘guiltless and innocent’<sup>1</sup> to hide masculinity and escape reprisals from masculinity (Riverie, “Womanliness as a Masquerade”, p. 133), Mishima similarly displays a strong sense of masculinity as a masquerade to draw

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affinity with other boys, and to cover up his cessation of interests in women. In Freudian's term, it is a "reaction formation",<sup>2</sup> a reaction formed by Mishima's guilt developed from his homosexual identity to be displaced by his pretense of masculinity in heterosexual society. For example, Mishima is drawn to the appearance of " a night-soiled man" (Mishima, *Confession of a Mask*, p. 8-9). The image of a night-soil man in association with excrement, a symbol of the earth, represents masculinity as the single identity of phallus symbolic order constructed under patriarchy. The night-soiled man, however, is inferior to the boy, for its unpleasant nature, in relation to excrement. Dressed in 'dark-blue "thigh-pullers"', 'carrying a yoke of night-soil buckets over one shoulder, balancing their heaviness expertly', the night-soiled man seemingly appears to be superior and masculine, whom Mishima is enigmatically drawn to. "I want to *be* him." (Mishima, *Confession of a Mask*, p. 8-9) Inferior to the night-soiled man as a boy, Mishima desires to transform himself into the masculine night-soiled man. The image of the ideal masculine night-soiled man is a mirror image of Mishima, according to Lacan, through which Mishima pursues his ideal, the masculine man. (Lacan, *Ecrits*, p. ) What Mishima emphasizes to perform is to 'act like a boy' to react against his guilt of possessing inadequate masculinity in heterosexual society, compared with other boys. (Mishima, *Confession of a Mask*, p.

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27) An example is playing wars with other boys. To Mishima, this is a 'social duty' a boy should bear. (Mishima, *Confession of a Mask*, p. 27) Warriors symbolize martyrdom, heroes. Boys, in patriarchal society, should be willing to sacrifice lives for the country to exhibit masculinity. Furthermore, Mishima's sheer misogyny reinforces his marginality. At first, Mishima is attracted by the masculinity of the knight of Joan of Arc. When he discovers 'he was a *she*', 'repugnance' is thus instinctively provoked in his 'first revenge by reality'. (Mishima, *Confession of a Mask*, p. 12) These illustrate that socialization poses an impact on how we perceive a boy in heterosexual society. Social experience plays a significant role in forming perceptions of others during sensitization. In so doing, the "ego" has to conform to "super-ego" to balance the "id", in Freudian's terms. "Ego" is interests of the "self". 'id' is the primary desire. "Super-ego" is the social norms that regulates/governs the "ego" controlling over "id". In other words, the "self" has to conform to "social norms" to gain the acceptance of the others. Mishima, in *Confession of a Mask*, puts his mask on, deceiving to be a masculine man who is interested in women but he is not. Social experience during childhood serves as a later base of developing gender identity. (Troiden, "A Model of Homosexual Identity Formation", p. 266)

Before puberty, there sets in identity confusion of Mishima, which plunges

him to doubt, uncertainty, and anxiety of himself. "Identity confusion" is dissonance resulting from homosexuals whose identities are in limbo and can no longer be taken as heterosexuals. (Troiden, "A Model of Homosexual Identity", p. 267) Having discovered his homosexual identity amid confusion of identities, Mishima hypnotizes himself in his performativity to conceal his homosexual identity different from the others, the heterosexuals.

Mishima's first ejaculation for the classic Roman martyr St. Sebastien (Mishima, *Confession of a Mask*, p. 41) testifies his sexual arousal by men driven by the Eroticism. Eroticism, according to Bataille, refers to sex driving the acceptance of life up to the moment of death. (Bataille, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, p. 20) Integrated into peers of the same-sex, Mishima falls in love with Omi. Mishima's 'unrequited love for Omi' with 'fierce, intense sensation' is what Michima cherishes most in its pristine form of love, in spite of its debasement and decay. (Mishima, *Confession of a Mask*, p. 71-2) It is a desired debased love cannot be loved, as Freud puts it. (Freud, "Debasement of Tendency of Love", p. 251) The 'ever-lasting, fierce desire to see Omi's naked body' (Mishima, *Confession of a Mask*, p. 73) is a sign of fetishism of Omi. The flesh of Omi appeals to Mishima sexually, which serves as 'a

substitute for a genital'<sup>3</sup> (Freud, "Fetishism" ,p. 354) to Mishima. The double-ness of Omi and Mishima that Mishima enacts (Mishama, *Confession of a Mask*, p. 88) not only incites sexual pleasure in fantasizing Omi, but also identifies Mishima with Omi who will share the same fate of "exclusion". The frequent repetition of the word "exclusion" appearing in the text signifies and reiterates the others, the marginalized to be tremendously excluded both physically and psychologically in society. Omi is excluded from school, for "evil" lies in him. "Evil" symbolizes the decayed, doomed, perverted homosexuality that is strictly forbidden in school. Foucault draws the distinction between the normal and the perverted categorized in our society. (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality I*, p. 316 ) "Evil" is classified as the "perverted", the excluded in society. Yet, Aristophanes in *the Symposium* draws that 'there were three human genders, not just the present two, male and female',<sup>4</sup> (Plato, *the Symposium*, p. 20) marking the existence of homosexuals or gathering of people of the same-sex. It is natural for a third kind of gender, homosexuals, coming into existence. In *Confession of a Mask*, gender segregation by grouping people of the same sex before puberty allows breeding the growth of homosexuals, like Mishima and Omi.

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Mishima also compares himself with other boys at his same age to discover his gender identity with regards to inertia mentality and external signs.

“Inertia mentality” means operation of inertia mentality inherent in human beings in accordance to biological organism. Whereas other boys are sexually aroused by women by any means, like the mere word ‘woman’<sup>5</sup>, Mishima has to ‘(cultivate) an artificial ability’ to conceal his loss of interests in women, evading the sexual impotency of a poet claimed by other boys. (Mishima, *Confession of a Mask*, p. 109)

A poet, to other boys, is construed as an image of a man freely to be jilted by women instead of being sexually aroused by women. What Mishima finds out more about himself is that his lack of sexual arousal in woman, which is the same as his indifference towards inanimate objects, like pens (Mishima, *Confession of a Mask*, p. 109). Compared with other boys, ‘in spite of the identical nature of the physical action, there was a profound difference so far as its mental objects were concerned.’ (Mishima, *Confession of a Mask*, p. 109)

External signs are signs symbolically significant to human beings responding to them. Symbolic interactionism is a discipline of sociology that explains how these

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external signs symbolically interact with human beings. For example, a woman's nude body causes a boy's erection. (Mishima, *Confession of a Mask*, p. 110) Mishima does not show any sexual response to any sexuality objects or actions nor could he realize sexual objects or actions would cause any ejections, such as kisses (Mishima, *Confession of a Mask*, p. 110) To excuse himself from being different from other boys, he argues that it is possible to have erection without desires (Mishima, *Confession of a Mask*, p. 110) and explains his incapability of dreaming women by laziness. The repetition structure of 'I did not know...' (Mishima, *Confession of a Mask*, p. 110) on one hand reinforces his denial of knowing anything about dreaming women, on the other hand repetitively uncovers his "repression" of cessation of interests in dreaming women. This double-ness fulfils the "uncanny" condition, 'which has undergone repression and then returned from it'<sup>6</sup>. (Freud, "Uncanny", p. 368) Mishima represses his impotency of dreaming women unconsciously, which has been returned by his repetitive self-denials.

Having discovered that he is different from others in terms of inertia mentality and interacting with external symbols/signs, Mishima defense himself via resorting to various excuses and means to cover up his difference in gender identity, compared

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with the others.

‘Life is a stage.’ (Mishima, *Confession of a Mask*, p. 101) During youth, unlike other boys who behave naturally in Mishima’s eyes, Mishima has to perform his masquerade on stage to conceal his homosexual identity. (Mishima, *Confession of a Mask*, p. 104) J. L. Austin states that the illocutionary binding force consists in performative speech, with which the speaker is responsible for his/her speech. The performative speech is happy if what is meant to be achieved is achieved. (Butler, “Critically Queer”, p. 225) Mishima successfully achieves his disguise of homosexuality in his performativity. Stepping on the stage for masquerade, Mishima voices his stream of consciousness out, ‘I am a human being like them in every respect... everyone is like me ...’<sup>7</sup>(Mishima, *Confession of a Mask*, p. 106), claiming he is the same as the other men. This is interpellated, in Althusser’s term, in the ideology of homosexuals. (Butler, “Critically Queer”, p. 226) “Queer” is thus interpellated through the subject Mishima, the homosexual, with repetitive invocation of pathology and guilt. (Butler, “Critically Queer”, p. 226) The repetitive affirmation of his sameness with others undermines his mastery of language, denying his

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difference from the others, as well as pointing out that ‘gender is an assignment’<sup>8</sup>, which could hardly be accomplished ideally. (Butler, “Critically Queer”, p. 231)

Queer as the discourse of homosexuals is performed in resistance to the discourse of the other, the discourse of the sanctioned heterosexuals. (Butler, “Critically Queer”, p.

226) However, performativity is not really meant to “do” something intentionally.

What Mishima defends himself is not to let others know he is identical with the others but to conceal, disavow his homosexual identity that others do not accept. Butler

emphasizes that it would be mistaken to see performativity to perform what is performed. Instead, performativity disavows, conceals, veils, the unconscious or the

repressed. (Butler, “Critically Queer”, p. 234) Performativity, like wearing a mask is

of a doubled, paradoxical nature, in my view. It either exhibits what to be performed or covers up by performance. One could hardly distinguish the difference between to

be seen and not to be seen by performativity or wearing a mask. Gender performance

is simply an allegory of a loss that cannot be grieved. (Butler, “Critically Queer”, p.

235) In this sense, Mishima has lost the recognition of his gender identity,

homosexuality that compels him to enact his part in the masquerade to allegorize the

grief of his loss. What is more about gender performance is that there is no doer but

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the deed only in the performance, according to Butler, which suggests the possibility of no subject right from the start. Nietzsche in *Genealogy of Morals* emphasizes human interpretation that determines the performance (Nietzsche, "Will to Power, p. 507). The identity of the subject is a social construction of the gender performance.

Mishima's acquaintance with Sonoko is a turning point of Mishima's life, which tests his homosexual identity. His encounter with Sonoko is repetitive since childhood till adolescence. The departure from Sonoko is a loss for Mishima, which exacerbates his loneliness. For instance, during the second world war and leaving of Sonoko, Mishima is suddenly overwhelmed by the idea/fantasy of falling in love with Sonoko. Along with the mechanism of repetitive cycle by Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Mishima reduces un-pleasure from the loss of Sonoko by gaining pleasure from the re-appearance of Sonoko in his pursuit to maintain the psychological equilibrium. This draws from the analogy of the child playing the fort/da game who substitutes the re-appearing one(s) for the loss. ( Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", p. 283-7 ) His pursuit of Sonoko is the return to the "origin", the ideal, which can never be attained by the impediment of Mishima's homosexual identity. 'In endless circles of inspection', Mishima masquerades himself as the normal who attempts to experience intimacy with Sonoko. (Mishima, *Confession of a Mask*, p. 152-3) Yet he finds out

that he '(loves) a girl without feeling any desire' (Mishima, *Confession of a Mask*, p. 131) and '(has) derived no pleasure from those kisses' (Mishima, *Confession of a Mask*, p. 187) He is simply the counterfeit of the normal. Baudrillard pinpoints that the counterfeit could hardly be distinguished from the real, the authentic by its simulacra nature. Baudrillard notes:

'The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth-it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true<sup>9</sup>.' (Baudrillard, Jean, *Simulations*, P. 1)

Mishima, in a way, could be construed as a true simulacrum, which does not conceal the truth of his homosexual identity but is a true simulacra/counterfeit of the normal. What he keeps on deceiving himself is the hypnosis of 'I told myself, (I) must simply love her' (Mishima, *Confession of a Mask*, p. 157) in the pretense of a heterosexual identity. He has to deceive himself that to be a counterfeit of the normal, he has to love his girl. This is to re-assure that others treat him as the normal in his role of the simulacra of the normal.

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Mishima's refusal to marrying Sonoko reveals the object-choice of Mishima, driving Mishima melancholic about his pathological life. Not only does Mishima lack sexual interests in Sonoko, but also Mishima cannot give birth to new generations as a homosexual. The Oedipus Complex ensures reproduction of new generations in society, which homosexuals threatens about. The boy in the Oedipus Complex fails to learn from his patriarchal father to be sexually attracted by a woman replacing the love for his mother (Hocquenghem Guy, "Oedipal Reproduction and Homosexuality", p. 106). That is why the homosexual, like the boy, has lost his sexual interests in ones of the opposite-sex. Like mourning over the loss or the death of the beloved one, Mishima feels melancholic about his emptiness, his unworthiness, his impotency in falling in love with women, his meaningless existence by muttering '...Surely I'm incapable of loving a woman ...but my pain was a strangely clear-cut agony, not fuzzy remorse...' (Mishima, *Confession of a Mask*, p. 232-3) Melancholia is a stage of depression individuals have to go through. For homosexuals, melancholia is inevitable when they cannot pursue an object-choice they desired in heterosexual society. Freud, in his essay *Mourning and Melancholia* discusses the mental features of melancholia,

‘The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment.’<sup>10</sup> (Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia*, p. 252)

Both mourning and melancholia share ‘the same loss of capacity to adopt any new object of love’,<sup>11</sup> however, what distinguishes melancholia from mourning is that ‘in mourning it is the world which has become poor and identity; in melancholia, it is the ego itself’<sup>12</sup>. In melancholia, the loss of the sexual object has shifted into the loss of the ego. The subject, sadly, only knows whom he has lost but not what he has lost. (Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia*, p. 254) Mitsuhisa has lost the subject or ego himself in ‘glittering, threatening reflections.’ (Mitsuhisa, *Confession of a Mask*, p. 254) His formless identity undergoes the “abjection” of himself. “Abjection” is the process of excluding the other during which the meanings of boundaries collapse. Out-of-season flowers and the syrupy sweetness of Coca-Cola are representations of

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Mishima's formless-ness (Mitsima, *Confession of a Mask*, p. 250), signifying the expulsion of the subject Mitsima in becoming the other, the homosexual at the expense of the loss of himself or more precisely, his death (Kristeva, *Approaching Abjection*, p. 3). The birth to his homosexuality is the result of "abjecting" himself within himself in heterosexuality. Homosexuality is the other of the heterosexuality, constituted by the "abjection"/exclusion of homosexuals in heterosexuality. The repetition of the word "pain" in the stream of Mitsima's melancholic consciousness strengthens his pathology, guilt, ... for unrecognized his form-less gender identity as a result of "abjection". Mitsima clings to the married Sonoko in successive secret meetings is meant to avert melancholia deeply felt inside him. Until Sonoko presses him for an explanation of this, the narrator responds bluntly, 'It (is) time.' (Mitsima, *Confession of a Mask*, p. 254) It is time that allows Mitsima to test out his homosexual identity against/over time. "Time", indubitably, is another masquerade concealing why he cordons Sonoko off, leading to his pathological life.

Gender, like any artistic expressions, is a performance. Mitsima, having dispensed with Sonoko as an object-choice, ends his "abjected" performance in pathology. The mask he takes off in the masquerade reveals his homosexual identity without any pretense of masculinity constructed in heterosexual society. Stephen

Heath, in his essay “Joan Riverie and the Masquerade” criticizes Riverie has undermined the integrity of womanliness with the artifice of the masquerade of womanliness in “Womanliness as a Masquerade”. Following the line of thought, this raises a possibility that Mishima has not worn a mask at all in the masquerade. Mishima’s genuine masculinity resides in Mishima, though masculinity he exhibits is a construct of homosexuality. It is true that Mishima’s “self” has been lost, in the performance of homosexuality, but not in the performance of heterosexuality. In a deeper thought of Butler, the constitution of the “self” never exists in the performative act. Mishima’s pen name is a sign signaling the true or fake existence of the “self” of Mishima, which possibly never exists in the real world.

*“Where is the “self”? ”*

*Life is a stage.*

*Gender, like any artistic expressions, is a performance.*



**ENDNOTES**

1. Joan Riviere (2000), "Womanliness as a Masquerade" in *Gender: Readers in Cultural Criticism*, New York: Palgrave, Anna Tripp, p. 133
2. Wayne Weiten (2001), Index: "Reaction Formation: Behaving in a way that is exactly the opposite of one's true feelings" in, *Psychology, Themes and Variations*, US: Wadsworth
3. Sigmund Freud (1991), "Fetishism" in *On sexuality : three essays on the theory of sexuality and other works*, compiled and edited by Angela Richards, Harmondsworth : Penguin
4. Plato (1946), *the Symposium*, UK: Penguin Classics, p. 20
5. Yukio Mishima(1958), *Confession of a Mask*, US: Penguin, p. 109
6. Sigmund Freud, "Uncanny" in *Art and Literature*, translated by Albert Dickson, Harmondsworth; Penguin, p. 368
7. Yukio Mishima(1958), *Confession of a Mask*, US: Penguin, p. 106
8. Judith Butler (1993), "Critically Queer" in *Bodies that Matter: On the discursive limits of "sex"*, New York: Routledge, p. 231
9. Jean Baudrillard (1983), *Simulations*, translated by Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman, New York : Semiotext (e), p. 1

10. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" in *Meta-psychology*, p. 252
11. *ibid*, p. 252
12. *ibid*, p. 254

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