Masks of Women:  
The Imposition of Role, the Suppression of Identity

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Masks of Woman

I. This is my daily mask  
daughter, sister  
wife, mother  
poet, teacher  
grandmother.

My mask is control  
concealment  
endurance  
my mask is escape from my self.

II. (Noh mask of benign woman)  
Over my mask  
my mask is control  
concealment  
endurance  
my mask is escape from my self.

But here  
I shall remove  
your mask of me  
like the used skin  
of a growing reptile  
it peels away and releases.

III. (Mask of Daruma, weighted toy-god)  
Daruma  
my mouth is a funnel  
words implode within and

burst forth through an  
inverted megaphone  
my eyes bulging command your  
I am Daruma  
push me  
I will not stay  
stare me down  
I will not look away  
dare me to laugh  
it off  
I will not wince  
a smile

Daruma moves  
me to resist  
Daruma defies me  
to act and  
I become

IV. (Mask of Onibaba, old witch)  
Onibaba  
old woman hag  
watch Onibaba's  
streaks of light  
ages of my sorrows  
glow through each  
lentigo  
my infrared rays  
will pierce your mask.

V. (Noh mask of benign woman)  
This is my daily mask  
daughter, sister  
wife, mother  
poet, teacher  
grandmother.

My mask is control  
concealment  
endurance  
my mask is escape from my self.
Brain

I. (A mask)
This is the Suppression of Identity

V. (Noh mask of benign woman)
This is my daily mask
daughter, sister wife, mother poet, teacher grandmother.

Mitsuye Yamada
Desert Run, Poems and Stories
Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s essay “The Madwoman in the Attic” explores the imposition of identity on women, and how through male-dominated literature, the image of woman as either angel or monster has come to have meaning and social impact in the lives of women. This essay is an attempt to understand the origin and nature of the “elaborate typology” of roles and masks that have been formulated for women (597). Gilbert and Gubar repeatedly use the image of a “mask” to describe both the “patriarchal definitions that intervene” between a woman and herself, and the functional identity she assumes from those definitions.

An example offered early in the essay is that of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s main character in Aurora Leigh. Aurora’s mother dies and the girl sadly reflects on a portrait of her mother painted shortly after her death. Browning writes that the image of Aurora’s mother became by turns (597):

- Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch, and sprite;
- A dauntless Muse whose eyes a dreadful fate;
- A loving Psyche who loses sight of love;
- A still Medusa with mild milky brows.
- All curled and all clothed upon with snakes
- Whose slime falls fast as sweat will; or anon
- Our lady of the Passion, stabbed with swords
- Where the Babe sucked; or Lamia in her first
- Moonlighted pallor, ere she shrunk and blinked,
- And shuddering wriggled down to the unclean...

Aurora’s extreme, melodramatic, ethereal descriptions of her mother’s image implies that, “She [Aurora] herself is fated to inhabit male-defined masks and costumes as her mother did, [and that] male-defined masks and costumes inevitably [will] inhabit her, altering her vision,” (597). These terms—angel, witch, and Muse—are the words Aurora learns to describe the essence of woman, and these are the terms used by her father and indicative of their society. The reader learns to substitute true knowledge of Aurora’s mother with an acceptance of the dramatized language of a young girl whose language has been ascribed to her via socialization. Furthermore, the vocabulary and range of images used in this passage are characteristic of white, upper class, educated English society, but as we read Mitsuye Yamada’s poem, “ Masks of Woman,” we see a cross-cultural sense of wearing masks and living life as a set of separate but joined identities.

The archetypal images of women discussed in Gubar and Gilbert’s essay correlate to Levi-Strauss’ assessments of myth in “The Structural Study of Myth.” Levi-Strauss writes, “The true constituent units of a myth are not isolated relations but bundles of such relations, and it is only as bundles that these relations can be put to use and combined so as to produce a meaning. . . What if patterns showing affinity, instead of being considered in succession, were to be treated as one complex pattern and read as a whole,“ (105). Regardless of social status, economic ranking, or education level women are assigned roles, and the labels put on those roles: mother, daughter, wife, beauty queen, prostitute, lover imply a world of information as to what the nature of a woman’s character could/should be. Associations attach themselves, even cross-cultural sentences, “A good mother is _______.” Quite similar adjectives and descriptors to answer these question is will those answers shed light on the truth? What are the constituent parts of womanhood as represented in society? How does the language use women come to define who they are seen to be?

Toni Morrison addresses issues such as the can people, in her essay, “Playing in the Dark.” Her is] a term for the denotative and connotative black have come to signify, as well as the entire range of meanings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentrism," (925). We can substitute the idea of the woman for "strong women---no brave African females helping the reader infer? The only passage where Melville’s woman aboard the San Dominick (Melville, 63):

His attention had been drawn to a slumber disclosed through the lacework of some rigging, lying careless disposed, under the lee of the bulwarks, like woodland rock. Sprawling at her lapped breasts, its hands like his attention had been drawn to a disclosed through the lacework of some rigging, carefully disposed, under the lee of the bulwarks, woodland rock. Sprawling at her lapped breasts. its hands like two paws, clambering upon her; it ally rooting to get at the mark and meantime giving blending with the composed snore of the Negress.

The angelic description of the sleeping Negro assumption that she is a poor, subjugated slave far from the toils of being in such a difficult state—she and burdened with a grabbing, suckling child. That this woman is a partner to the ship’s mutinous men of her clever tales (like BaBo) and see her bravery but surely these facets of her character exist. Future blindness comes as he reflects on the older African women remind him of unsophisticated leopards “naturalistic” behaviors give him a sense of ease well on the ship (Melville, 63). These women are Delano thinks. He is oblivious to any treachery and gentle mothers whose angelic and magnanimous.
nature of a woman's character could/should be. For example, bundles of associations attach themselves, even cross-culturally, to the following types of sentences, "A good mother is ________," "A slut is ________;" and "To be beautiful is _________." Quite a few people would have similar adjectives and descriptors to answer these questions, but the real question is will those answers shed light on the true nature of "woman-ness?"

What are the constituent parts of womanhood and how are they lost or underrepresented in society? How does the language used to describe the roles of women come to define who they are seen to be?

Toni Morrison addresses issues such as this, but with respect to African people, in her essay, "Playing in the Dark." Here she writes, "[Africanism] is a term for the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people," (925). We can substitute the idea of women for African peoples and perhaps the term "womanism" in lieu of Africanism, and we have a sense of how cultural and social development influence and signify what it means to be a woman, and moreover, what is valuable about being a woman. The following books, Benito Cereno, Things Fall Apart, Emma, and Passing reveal the power of cultural influence on the significance of women in the home, the village, and the society as a whole. To start, Melville doesn't delve too far into gender issues, and that in itself is telling. If the story lacks representation of strong women—no brave African females helping lead the mutiny, what must the reader infer? The only passage where Melville specifically describes a woman aboard the San Dominick (Melville, 63):

His attention had been drawn to a slumering Negress, partly disclosed through the lacework of some rigging, lying, with youthful limbs carelessly disposed, under the lee of the bulwarks, like a doe in the shade of a woodland rock. Sprawling at her lapped breasts was her wide-awake fawn...its hands like His attention had been drawn to a slumbering Negress, partly disclosed through the lacework of some rigging, lying, with youthful limbs carelessly disposed, under the lee of the bulwarks, like a doe in the shade of a woodland rock. Sprawling at her lapped breasts was her wide-awake fawn...its hands like two paws, clambering upon her; its mouth and nose ineffectually rooting to get at the mark and meantime giving a vexatious half-grunt, blending with the composed snore of the Negress.

The angelic description of the sleeping mother derives from Delano's assumption that she is a poor, subjugated slave woman seeking brief respite from the.toils of being in such a difficult state—starving, enslaved, marooned, and burdened with a grabbing, suckling child. The reader realizes later that this woman is partner to the ship's mutinous members! We may not hear any of her clever tales (like Babo) or see her bravery and strength (like Atufai), but surely these facets of her character exist. Further evidence of Delano's blindness comes as he reflects on the older African women on board. These women remind him of unsophisticated leopardesses and loving doves whose "naturalistic" behaviors give him a sense of ease and reassurance that all is well on the ship (Melville, 63). These women are very different from what Delano thinks. He is oblivious to any treachery and ascribes them roles as gentle mothers whose angelic and magnanimous bosoms require rest and

Susan Gubar's essay "The Madwoman in the At-}
quietude from difficult lives, and as wise old women who represent warmth and comfort even under the greatest duress.

Janet Austen's *Emma* is rife with gender/power struggles and role assignment issues. Emma is afforded a lot of "luxuries" as a woman because of her social position, but more importantly because she is mistress of her home. She refuses to get married saying to Harriet, "I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry. Were I to fall in love, indeed, it would be a different thing! but I never have been in love; it is not my way, or my nature. . .without love, I'm sure I should be a fool to change such a situation as mine. ...I believe few married women are half as much mistress of their husband's house as I am of Hatfield." Harriet is flabbergasted saying, "...it is so odd to hear a woman talk so!" and her next step is to declare that Emma will be an "old maid like Mrs. Bates" (Austen, 55). Emma values her freedom and doesn't want to forsake the power of choice. She knows quite well that if she marries, it's likely she will have to relinquish the very things about herself and her life that she cherishes.

Harriet's reaction is the most telling during this exchange. It's inconceivable to Harriet that Emma wouldn't marry, and Harriet is not the only one. It seems "odd" to Emma's society (in that time and age) that a healthy, attractive young woman would choose NOT to marry. Surely they thought her ill, and certainly not very much of a "woman" to refuse to be a wife, housekeeper, and mother. Austen is deliberate in the careful construction of the relationship between Mr. Knightley and Emma, for she's worked so hard the entire novel advocating female self-sufficiency and independence. Emma feels regarded as an intellectual equal by Mr. Knightley, and it works out that Mr. Knightley will come to live with Emma and her father, thus allowing Emma to remain as matriarch of Hatfield. We become familiar with Emma's masks as the story unfolds—mother (to her father), mentor (to Harriet), immature girl to be chastised (by Mr. Knightley), and paragon of virtue (to the poor and elderly in the community). She plays many roles as a woman in her home and community, and with her new marriage, Emma will assume even more imposed responsibilities.

Gubar and Gilbert characterize the expectations of 18th century women saying that society, "[enjoins] young girls to submissiveness, modesty, selflessness; reminding all women that they should be angelic...[the creation of the] 'eternal feminine' virtues of modesty, gracefulness, purity, delicacy, civility, compliancy, reticence, chastity, affability, and politeness," (600). Although Emma struggles to define herself as a "liberated" and independent woman, we know that she resides in a house and society full of expectations based on her gender and social status.

Switching to another time period and a radically different culture, Chinua Achebe's main character in *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo, says of his favorite daughter, "I wish she were a boy." (Achebe, 173). Okonkwo's extreme pride enables meanness to his wives and children, but he has a special bond with his daughter Enzinma. He feels as though she understands him, and it is to her alone that he shows any measurable love or tenderness. She embodies the qualities he and the village deem as meaningful—she is sensible, tenacious, and blessed by the gods, but Okonkwo knows that she will never have the power and privileges of being an important man in the tribe.

Ezinma will have to "settle" for marrying an impotent village youth who will reap the benefits of his position. Such is the cult of the village and the fate she is resigned to because she reveals the concept of kinships within/between the plains in "The Traffic of Women." Rubin explicitly gifts the reader with kinship exchanges between tribes/mechanisms for male maintenance of power, while the kinship exchanges explored in the text. Rubin, in which there is no equivalent for a woman. To get a daughter, sister, or other female kinswoman in stowal. He must have control over some female! Another important point to make regard to representation of the priestess throughout the novel the other men have dominance over the priestess. And the village. Chiefo, priestess of Agbalimma and restores life to her (like Jesus/Lazarus) The villagers fear these females, even when they are their own wives! What's important to note here, Gilbert's essay is the depiction of these frightening portraits Chiefo portrays Chiefo as a mad woman whose sound of her voice sound like metal, and when Okonkwo begins to Agbalama, Chiefo screams, "Beware of exchanging a man speak when a god speaks? Chiefo then walks mother Ekwe, and when Ekwe resists yielding to "her voice cracking like the angry bark of thunder" (101). Albeit a spokesperson for a god, Chiefo is Gilbert term the "antithetical mirror image of an angelic creature of otherness, she incarnates the damning of men than inspiring otherness of the spirit," (603). In this monster/devil image that Chiefo has power in the tribe.

The final work, Nella Larsen's *Passing*, de-identity. Larsen's two main characters, Clare as racial, and gender identities, all the while struggling for placed on them by their families and society. Irene has a rest role for most of the novel. From her point of violation, Irene, mother and daughter, not to mention her race. Clare didn't ascribe herself to the roles and at times Irene's jealousy is painfully clear, but simply regards Clare as capricious and insensitive.

Irene has been conditioned to absorb what white people and the influential black people with accepting these social mores, Irene strongly believes should as well, and any deviation, as with her husband is unacceptable. We see another side of Irene who and passionate desires for life intrigue and even elements of time when Irene relinquishes her stringing, and allows herself the indulgence of a smile, she's with Clare. Judith Fetterly describes "Rip Van Wie in a way that's similar to how we read Irene (6)}
Ezinma will have to "settle" for marrying an important man, and then she will reap the benefits of his position. Such is the cultural influence of Ezinma's village and the fate she is resigned to because she is a female. Achebe reveals the concept of kinships between tribes/cultures/societies as mechanisms for male maintenance of power, while Achebe implies it through the kinship exchanges explored in the text. Rubin writes, "These are systems in which there is no equivalent for a woman. To get a wife, a man must have a daughter, sister, or other female kinwoman in whom he has a right of bestowed. He must have control over some female flesh," (552).

Another important point to make regarding Things Fall Apart is the representation of the priestess throughout the novel. Here, neither Okonkwo nor the other men have dominance over the priestesses and goddesses presiding over the village. Chielo, priestess of Agbala, takes special care of Ezinma and restores life to her (like Jesus/Lazarus) when she is seriously ill. The villagers fear these females, even when they have the audacity to beat their own wives! What's important to note here, with respect to Gubar and Gilbert's essay is the depiction of these frightening, imposing god-women. Achebe portrays Chielo as a mad woman whose screeching prophecies make her voice sound like metal, and when Okonkwo balks at surrendering Ezinma to Agbala, Chielo screams, "Beware of exchanging words with Agbala. Does a man speak when a god speaks?" Chielo then walks in to surrender Ezinma to her mother Ekwefi, and when Ekwefi resists yielding Ezinma, Chielo curses with "her voice cracking like the angry bark of thunder in the dry season," (100-101). Albert a spokesperson for a god, Chielo is clearly what Gubar and Gilbert term the "anthithetical mirror image of an angel" and she is "a representative of otherness, she incarnates the damning of otherness of the flesh rather than inspiring otherness of the spirit," (603). In this manner, it's through the monster/devil image that Chielo has power in the village.

The final work, Nella Larsen's Passing, deeply explores the nature of identity. Larsen's two main characters, Clare and Irene, question racial, sexual, and gender identities, all the while struggling against the traditional roles placed on them by their families and society. Irene adheres to the traditionalist role for most of the novel. From her point of view, Clare falls as a traditional wife, mother and daughter, not to mention her failure as a "sister" to her race. Clare didn't ascribe herself to the roles expected/imposed on her, and at times Irene's jealousy is painfully clear, but for the most part, Irene simply regards Clare as capricious and insensitive.

Irene has been conditioned to absorb what is socially acceptable to white people and the influential black people with whom she associates. In accepting these social mores, Irene strongly believes that everyone else should as well, and any deviation, as with her husband's desire to go to Brazil, is unacceptable. We see another side of Irene when Clare's "angelic" beauty and passionate desires for life intrigue and even beguile Irene. There are moments of time when Irene relinquishes her stringent female/mother moralizing, and allows herself the indulgence of a smile, a dance, or a cigarette when she's with Clare. Judith Fetterley describes "Rip Van Winkle's" Dame Van Winkle in a way that's similar to how we read Irene (when she is being "uptight").
writing that Rip was a hen-pecked husband always "cowering before his ter-
magant Dame," (562). We see Irene trying to enact this type of control over
her husband and children—the angelic savior of their home and race, while we
see Clare portrayed as the lovely seductress whose life is led by impulse and
intrigue.

This interplay is so complex, and if we think of Clare and Irene in
terms of triangulation we need to make some minor modifications. There
exists Clare, Irene, and both of their personal agendas (which are coupled
with their public masks). In addition, there exists Clare, Irene, and their se-
cret desires for love, freedom, ownership, and so forth. In either scenario,
Irene and Clare are essential to the triangle, and the third point is either
Irene's "truth" of public presentation vs. Clare's secret desires, or Clare's pub-
lic persona vs. what Irene knows of Clare/judges her by. The interplay be-
tween the two women is always about presenting a forced front, a false front,
or a pretense front, with the ultimate goal of hiding what is "real." Like Clare
or not, her character gives insight into Irene's stymied sense of freedom, and
Clare's "I don't care" behavior sets a backdrop by which we can see how much
Irene has assumed, assimilated, and incorporated the roles assigned to her.
It's the "I don't care" attitude of Clare—her willingness to jeopardize her posi-
tion and cast aside her identity (there's the rub!)—which leaves Irene flabber-
gasted and intrigued. Clare's personality and opinion of life is simultaneously
inconceivable and overwhelmingly attractive to Irene and as Irene's traditional
masks are destroyed, so is her life.

Gubar and Gilbert succeed in revealing the presence of typologies in
our society, and they open up discussion about the nature of societal value
judgments on women. Be they angels or monsters, be they wives or widows,
be they saints or sinners, women will always be defined as and against what
society deems as valuable at that time. Emma is a "good" woman because
she adheres (by in large) to 18th century ideas about womanhood. Ezinma
would make a "good" boy/son in the village because of her strength and ten-
acity. Clare is a "bad" woman because she's a deceptive wife and she sees
her child as a hindrance to her life—her desire for freedom is unnatural. I
share opinion with Gubar and Gilbert in that women need to explore and find
their own "voice." Women need to understand what masks they wear for
others, to hide themselves, to adhere to mores, and so forth so that they may
begin deconstructing those impositions. Moreover, they need to express this
knowledge and their new found (or newly discovered/uncovered) voices as
often as possible, for it will be through an innumerable succession of stories
told by strong, unapologetic women that a fuller chronicle of what being a
woman "means" will come to pass. As the concept and definition of "woman"
expands, so also shall the variety of masks and roles she chooses from ex-
pand, and the result will be the contraction of societal role assignment and
diminished imposition of archaic language structures that support the submis-
sion of identity.