

**The Masks We Wear:  
Performative Identities Across Literary, Cultural,  
and Historical Landscapes**

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A thesis submitted to the Department of English and Humanities in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of M.A. in English

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**Declaration**

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my original work while completing my degree at BRAC University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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**Approval**

“The Masks We Wear: Performative Identities Across Literary, Cultural, and Historical Landscapes” submitted by Farzana Islam (ID:23163003), in Spring 2025, has been accepted as satisfactory in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master’s in English on June 15th, 2025.

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation analyses masks as multivalent interfaces that allow for identities to be concealed and revealed within the contexts of literary, socio-cultural, and theatrical avenues. A transdisciplinary approach to understanding the liminal capacities of both tangible and metaphorical masks has been central to addressing the notion of authenticity versus performativity, or if the two even differ in terms of identity construction, transformation and at times reconfiguration. Richard Schechner's *Performance Theory* head starts the investigation by encompassing human performance in a spectrum of sociocultural, ritual, and theatrical aspects, along with Claude Lévi-Strauss's more structural anthropological framework in *The Way of the Mask* to understand masks as material fragments of culture. The intricate dynamic between concealment and revelation is allowed to function because of the liminal capacities that the mask wields. Threshold experiences are used to understand and highlight a more psychological dimension of masking, where identity construction occurs, albeit not necessarily always by one's will.

**Keywords:** Masks, Performance, Identity, Transformation, Concealment and Revelation.

## Acknowledgement

Completing a milestone in life is rarely, if ever, a solo venture, even if a single name is attached to the label on the end result.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 The Multivalent Mask: Navigating Identity Through Concealment and Revelation**

In exploring the intricate correlation between culture and performance, the concept of the mask as a tangible cultural artefact as well as a symbolic entity, emerges as a powerful category of investigation. From ancient rituals and practices to modern performances, various usages of masks can be seen as illustrating a complex interplay between concealment and revelation. It becomes clear upon closer inspection that a mask, both tangible and metaphorical, can obscure not just an identity but also intentions, emotions and even narratives, creating new ones in their stead. This research investigates how masks serve as powerful symbols of identity and transformation in the performative arts, particularly focussing on the domain of literature while also drawing from other cultural and performative avenues. Through this journey we discover deep human experiences of transformation and self-expression, and at times self-preservation, when examining the different masking practices across cultures and periods, as the mask paradoxically both reveals and conceals, showing us how identity is not a fixed essence but a dynamic process of becoming.

Historically, masks have evidently served a multitude of purposes, including in the performing arts in theatres, in religious or cultural rituals, and as artefacts in tribes. Concealing identities for reasons concerning ethical, social or survivalist purposes (e.g., war and disease), and even in festivities. By analysing these manifold roles that a mask can be attributed to, it helps to understand the potential it wields to be so much more than a simple object or instrument that hides a persona or identity. It also possesses the ability to reveal deeper truths about cultural meanings and contexts regarding human psychology. Even though there is an intrinsic, captivating visual

appeal to the concept of the mask, its significance extends beyond tangible sources or theatricality to the emotional or psychological insights into the human experience it so readily provides.

## 1.2 Defining Performative Identity

Richard Schechner's comprehensive work on *Performance Theory* (2013) is the central theoretical apparatus used in this research to understand how, "Performing is a mode of behavior that may characterize any activity. Thus, performance is a "quality" that can occur in any situation rather than a fenced-off genre." (p. 29). Engaging with Richard Schechner's performance theory in the chapters that follow, this thesis will explore how the mask can be placed in a framework in which it functions to form a spectrum of meanings that ranges from ritual to entertainment, from façade (theatrical or sociocultural performance) to psychology. The investigation, therefore, is anchored in the concept of performative identity. This framework understands identity not as an essential, unchanging and innate property but rather as constituted through iterative acts of performance within specific sociocultural contexts.

The comprehensive study of masking practices in *Masks* (2010), by Sharrona Pearl, expresses these ideas further. Elaborating on how the mask does not merely serve as an instrument of disguise and wields transformative capabilities that facilitate alternative subjectivities to emerge, reveal, rather than merely conceal, fundamental truths about the human experience. "All these masks protect, as masks do. All conceal, as masks do. And, as that which conceals always does, if we know how to look and how to see what is and is not visible alongside one another, what is and is not explicit, what is and is not displayed - meaningfully and in ways symbolic and grounded, theoretical and practical, reveal." (p. 5). Which is to say, that the aspect of disguising what is made to be concealed is merely one facet of the mask, as it quite readily can achieve in

doing, but it most certainly is not its sole purpose. As Richard Schechner observes in his seminal work, performance and masking are not just aesthetic practices but fundamental aspects of human expression across cultures and historical periods. “The phenomena called either/all ‘drama,’ ‘theater,’ ‘performance’ occur among all the world’s peoples and date back as far as historians, archeologists, and anthropologists can go.” (p. 67). Explaining how humans have likely *always* expressed themselves through “dancing, singing, wearing masks and/or costumes, impersonating other humans, animals, or supernaturals, acting out stories, presenting time 1 at time 2, isolating and preparing special places and/or times for these presentations” (p. 67), just as they did in the ancient Tuc d’Audoubert cave<sup>1</sup>. Illustrating how they can function as more than just symbols alone, and as manifestations of spiritual or cultural forces, or even operate more as communicative devices within narrative frameworks.

This investigation also incorporates phenomenological approaches to understand the embodied dimension of mask-wearing as a “lived experience”. Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012, 1945) explains the notion of “body schema” that focuses on the body’s position in space, the boundaries it faces and the capabilities it holds. Applied to the practice of mask wearing, the mask also alters the wearer’s body schema, incorporated into the wearer’s lived body experience and acts as an extension, not just a disguise. This becomes a corporeal relationship consisting of the space, the self and the other (the spectators or audience). The altered state prompted by the mask’s usage can be understood through phenomenological tradition rooted in Edmund Husserl’s work and later Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre, as to how the mask fundamentally transforms the wearer's relationship to their own body and others

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<sup>1</sup> What astounds Schechner and many others about this ancient cave filled with cave paintings and bison sculptures, is the fact that it was not only difficult if not altogether inaccessible as a space for ritualistic, performative practises even as early as 14000 years ago.

through intersubjectivity<sup>2</sup>. Where consciousness and intentionality are only part of the intended identity created upon wearing the mask, and perception from both the self and the other feeds into the process of reshaping and transformation.

### **1.3 Masks Across Cultural Landscapes: A Transdisciplinary Approach**

The theoretical paradigm of performative identities created by masks, whether literal or metaphorical, effectively functions not as mere deviations of the concept of selfhood but rather as a tool that can modify and at times intensify the performative processes through which all identities are constructed. The performative process is a simultaneous set of actions that occur during interactions of the self with the external, framed by traditional, ritual, sociocultural, survival or artistic factors. This research adopts a transdisciplinary methodological approach that integrates literary analysis, performance studies, anthropological insights, and historical contextualisation to examine masking practices across literary, cultural, and historical landscapes.

This is an attempt to provide a comprehensive understanding of the mask as a critical device to understand the performative dimensions of identity across said domains. Through interdisciplinary analysis that integrates textual interpretation, historical contextualization, theoretical engagement, and visual analysis, this research demonstrates how masks, in their multifaceted manifestations, reveal the fundamental instability and perpetual reinvention that characterise all processes of identity formation. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956), Erving Goffman argues that everyday life is akin to theatre: people are actors presenting themselves on the “stage” of social interaction, managing impressions for an audience through

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<sup>2</sup> Intersubjectivity being, “an implicit agreement about how the world looks”.  
<https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ces/research/current/socialtheory/maps/phenomenology/>

crafted routines. Identity, therefore, becomes less of an inherent essence than a performance adapted to one's setting and audience.

#### **1.4 Research Objectives and Methodology**

This thesis aims to develop a comprehensive understanding of the mask as a critical device to highlight its performative dimensions of identity across the literary, cultural and historical landscapes. This research, therefore, addresses the question of how and in what ways masks act as multivalent liminal interfaces, simultaneously creating and concealing identities, functioning as a transformative apparatus across literary, socio-cultural and theatrical performances both as material artefacts and theoretical manifestations.

The reason for this particular venture is to represent one of humanity's most enduring yet underexamined cultural technologies in the form of masks. Although the debate between authenticity versus performance is by no means a novel one, this investigation attempts to bridge the gap between these two seemingly opposite states of identity by revealing that masks serve as essential tools for identity construction, transformation, and exploration, and not only deception. This very notion of masks challenging the concept of a fixed identity and instead functioning as a transformative apparatus is what makes this venture a compelling one.

The primary components of this methodological approach encompass employing textual analysis, visual analysis, historical contextualisation and theoretical engagement of an interdisciplinary framework drawn from, particularly the works of Richard Schechner, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Mikhail Bakhtin, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and other contemporary cultural studies (e.g., Sharrona Pearl). The literary and textual sources include conducting a reading of literary

texts that deploy masking as a narrative device or thematic concern, including Gaston Leroux's *The Phantom of the Opera* (2002), Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (2003), and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" (1902).

Historical accounts and sociocultural scholarly analysis of masking practices have been incorporated, including James H. Johnson's (2017) *Venice Incognito: Masks in the Serene Republic*, documenting quite vividly how Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque comes to life in the social functions of masquerades in Venetian carnivals. Other historical accounts from Henry Freeman's (2007) *The Black Death* contextualise the now iconic plague doctor masks within mediaeval European responses to the pandemic of the Black Death. Visual and material artefacts have also been analysed as representations of masking practices across diverse cultural contexts, considering their aesthetic and symbolic properties, highlighting their contextual functions.

Having established a brief overview of the methodological foundations of this research, we now turn to a more critical examination of the conversation surrounding masks and identity across disciplinary boundaries. The following literature review synthesises the theoretical perspective of masking practices and traditions. Reviewing the mask as it exists at the intersection of multiple theoretical discourses, demanding an interdisciplinary engagement within the terrains of performance studies, anthropology, literary analysis, and cultural history.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The literature review will look closely at diverse scholarly discussions and perspectives that have taken place in the domain of culture and history regarding masks as both physical objects and metaphorical constructs. The review of diverse scholarly work, primary sources and theoretical frameworks is structured around three central research questions: how masks simultaneously conceal and create identities; how they facilitate movement across identities in various contexts as liminal objects; and how the functions and meanings of masks have evolved historically to reflect changing conceptions of selfhood and social performance.

### 2.1 Theoretical Frameworks

#### 2.1.1 Performance Theory: Liminal Negotiations

Richard Schechner's *Performance Theory* (2013, 1988) provides a foundational framework for understanding masking practices within the context of both social and theatrical performance. Schechner argues that all social interactions involve some elements of performance and that masks only serve as explicit acknowledgements of said performance. This helps to position masks precisely at an intersection, between the performer and what's being performed. Schechner's framework, therefore, argues that the transformative capacities that masks hold create a liminal state where the masked performer is neither fully themselves nor completely the character being portrayed. Categorising this state as "restored behavior", or more precisely as "twice-behaved behavior" or "rehearsed behavior" (p. 271), situating all social interactions to be placed within a performative context, and putting masks (both material and metaphorical) as manifestations of the inherently performative nature of identity construction. This sense of a liminal space created by masks is further enhanced by the discourse presented by John Bell's edited

collection *Puppets, Masks and Performing Objects* (2006), as it establishes the relationship between performer and object (in this case, puppets, masks or any other object required for a performance). Representing “zones of contact” (p. 23) where divisions between the performer and the performing object no longer remain sharp or distinguishable.

Bell argues that as long as the mask shares corresponding visual features with the performer’s own face, the character’s centre of gravity remains firmly within the performer. However, this shifts drastically when masks exceed the constraints of human physiognomy (e.g., being oversized dramatically, having disproportionate features, or not humanlike in proportions). Crossing this threshold would allow the mask or the performing object to develop its own centre of gravity, structure and presence, granting it a sort of autonomous identity. Paralleling what Maurice Merleau-Ponty states as “body schema” in *Phenomenology of Perception*, a phenomenon where one is aware of the positions of their limbs through lived experience, through spatial awareness. It is the “global awareness of my posture in the inter-sensory world” (p. 102), but also, that it “is not merely an experience of my body, but rather an experience of my body in the world” (p. 142). Therefore, external objects certainly cause a disturbance in this schema, such as masks do for their wearers’ lived experience (e.g., altering spatial experiences, such as limiting movement, vision or hearing, etc.). Suggesting that the intended effect of wearing the mask is not the entirety of the achieved end result which consists of the occupied space, the perception of the wearer, as well as the perception of the viewer or the audience.

This very performance-centred approach is, however, not without its fair share of criticism. According to Rustam Bharucha, universalising performance of this nature can flatten cultural specificity. In his article, “Theatre and the World: Performance and the Politics of Culture” (1993), Bharucha argues that Schechner’s approach to using non-Western performance traditions

constitute a form of cultural pillage. The power dynamics in this intercultural exchange are further developed in his work *The Politics of Cultural Practice: Thinking Through Theatre in an Age of Globalization* (2000). In which he argues with great conviction, that there is “imperfection” when shaping inter/multicultural collaborations because there is always a form of negotiation involved. A “fusion of horizon” becomes premature and requires addressing from whose perspective the “inter/multi” aspect is being addressed (p. 41). Boldly stating that Schechner’s ideas lack distinctions between the national and global, which, to Bharucha, are essential elements for retaining cultural significance. Referring to and resisting Schechner’s ideas about how human history has always been intercultural, more so in the aftermath of colonialism (*Performance Theory*, p. 131), Bharucha says that nationalism is “clearly the villain of this breezy utopian universalism” (p. 31). Expressing his disapproval of Schechner seemingly ignoring differences that can occur due to cultural and national diversities having vastly different experiences in the world.

This tension between Schechner’s more universal approach to performance theory and cultural specificity as voiced by Bharucha, finds a compelling expression in “Bravely Fought the Queen” (1991), by Indian playwright Mahesh Dattani. The play feeds into Bharucha’s comment of a cultural pillage that can occur in overlooking national and culturally specific practises in terms of social interactions and performance. This is because Dattani demonstrates the performative nature of gender and sexuality from a place of Indian middle-class experiences and anxieties. From conventional masculinity as seen in Vikram’s role, to the perpetual gender policing faced by the women in the play, or even Nitin’s internal turmoil as he uses his heterosexual marriage as a social mask to hide his inner turmoil for the sake of cultural acceptability, all are deeply drawn from very specific dynamics in postcolonial urban India. This perhaps reveals how social masks formed in

response to necessitating protection and self-preservation, are sometimes integrated so deeply that it becomes impossible to remove them and restore what was once beneath.

### 2.1.2 Structural Anthropology

In his seminal work *The Way of the Mask* (1988), Claude Lévi-Strauss approaches and examines masks through structural anthropology, as encoded systems of cultural mythology and social organisation. He centres his methodology of the work on what he terms plastic forms or manifestations, referring to the formal properties of a mask that constitutes a visual language that expresses the symbolic value it holds within the culture it belongs to. Conducting a comparative analysis of the Salish and Kwakiutl masking traditions, Lévi-Strauss concludes that a mask is not what it primarily represents (e.g., visually, materially) but more so what it transforms into, what it chooses and does not choose to represent (p. 144). This very transformational quality attributed to masks is what makes it a mediator between culturally constructed binary categories such as nature/culture, human/divine, natural/supernatural, etc.

Irving Goldman demonstrates parallels with Lévi-Strauss's structural approach in *The Mouth of Heaven* (1975) of the mask by inspecting the Kwakiutl masks and their abilities to enact mythological narratives. Goldman argues that these masks wield components that are malleable and manipulable, and that they can reveal hidden faces. Terming it as a structural transformation made visible. This holds true in giving spiritual and mythical concepts that are otherwise invisible to the naked eye, a physical form in the shape of specifically designed masks that the Kwakiutl people meticulously prepare.

However, this structuralist approach has faced significant criticisms. Clifford Geertz, in his book *Interpretation of Cultures*, chapter 13, “The Cerebral Savage: On the Work of Claude Lévi-

Strauss”, argues that his approach creates a “cerebral savage”. Explaining the term to be an intellectualised abstraction divorced from lived reality. He states, “For what Lévi-Strauss has made for himself is an infernal culture machine. It annuls history, reduces sentiment to a shadow of the intellect, and replaces the particular minds of particular savages in particular jungles with the Savage Mind immanent in us all.” (p. 355). The statement highlights Geertz’s fundamental objection to Lévi-Strauss’s approach, expressing his thoughts on how it abstracts away from human lived experience and specific cultural contexts, putting it into a mere theoretical framework. Geertz’s perspective highlights how, even though it is difficult to resist the impulse to seek out broader cultural truths through reading and observing specific uses of masks within specific groups of people, there aren’t unifying means in Strauss’s observations to universalise these experiences, particularly because they are observations and not a reflection of lived experience.

## **2.2 Tangible Masks Across Contexts**

### **2.2.1 Ritual and Spiritual Masks**

Functioning as powerful mediators between humans and the spiritual realms, masks have been used in diverse cultural traditions across the globe. Allowing the wearer to embody deities, ancestors or supernatural beings and entities while adhering to their specific governing protocols of belief and tradition. Anthropological documentation of many of these tangible ritual masks have been discussed elaborately on chapter 4, such as the Alaskan “Spirit Mask” (1801-1900) preserved at the Science Museum Group Collection (Sir Henry Wellcome’s Museum Collection), that represents a mask used to channel and materialise friendly spiritual entities to facilitate human-spirit communication. The “Horned Forest Spirit Mask” from the Kuba Kingdom in Africa, preserved in the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology, is another example of

a mask created and used to establish a connection with nature and the dwelling spirits within it, by adorning a spirit-like identity upon the mask's usage.

Gary Edson provides a theoretical framework in his work *Masks and Masking: Faces of Tradition and Belief Worldwide* (2011) in understanding how objects, in this case masks, can transform wearers into vehicles for ancestral or divine forces in various cultural traditions, as sophisticated cultural technologies that navigate boundaries of identities. Furthermore, the work explores how masks contribute to playing a part in social dynamics, power structures, and defining and redefining traditions in acts of self-expression.

### **2.2.2 Theatrical and Performative Masks**

When a performer puts on a theatrical mask, they successfully enter a realm where identity splits and, in turn, transforms into a new one. The ancient Greek terracotta masks, dated from around the 6th-5th century BCE, preserved in the Hermitage Museum, Russia, are some of the oldest preserved masks in history. The foundational usage of theatrical masks even as early as that particular era, was not to use these performative objects as merely tools of disguise, but also to amplify the character portrayed by the actor, to manifest the new identity on stage while also keeping practical purposes (e.g., creating a visual language connecting the performers and the audience within the large amphitheatres for better understanding) intact. This aspect can be understood through Merleau-Ponty's "body schema", where the mask that so thoroughly disguises and evokes the portrayed character on stage through the wearer becomes a part of the lived body experience of that very performer.

This understanding of masking practice reappears in the Japanese Noh theatre, as the Kojo or the Hannya masks aren't simply representational objects but physical vessels through which a

performer channels specific emotional states in their extremities, such as wrath, fear, anguish or despair in multiplicity. These masks also have important cultural significance, as the Japanese value resourcefulness and efficiency that are reflected within their very design.

## **2.3 Non-Tangible Masks**

### **2.3.1 Literary and Psychoanalytic Dimensions:**

Having briefly discussed masks as physical artefacts that can create a bifurcation of identities ranging from the wearer, the performed character and the observer, we now venture into the domain of non-tangible masks. In the literary arena, masks have been embraced as a metaphor for social duplicity and psychological fragmentation. Particularly in Victorian Gothic literature, where the use of both physical and metaphorical masks can be observed.

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, perhaps, presents one of the most striking examples and integrations of the masking concept. We see the seemingly innocent face of the protagonist conceal his moral corruption and depravity behind his forged persona. This duality of identities observed in Dorian Gray's character is what the Freudian lens might recognise as a division of consciousness, one between his self-presentation of a carefully crafted persona (superego) and his inner, more repressed impulses (id). In Gaston Leroux's *The Phantom of the Opera*, however, we see a physical mask worn by Erik to the point where it becomes inseparable from his identity, blurring the lines between where the mask ends and where the self begins. Once again, feeding into the ideas of Merleau Ponty's body schema and John Bell's performative objects, as the wearer's lived body experience and the shift in the centre of gravity from the wearer to the mask occur seamlessly. In this case, the mask creates a defensive identity for Erik as a

response to wanting acceptance because he has been defaced, and it both hides the disfiguration and elevates his mysteriousness.

Louisa May Alcott's *Behind a Mask* (1866), however, integrates both metaphorical and physical masking attributes through the protagonist. As Jean Muir is observed creating a mask for herself, not by simply wearing a physical artefact or crafting a persona, but a complex version of both by altering her appearance and behaviour to become a different person entirely. Hiding her natural features and working-class background behind a wig, false teeth, and her knowledge from a failed acting career to implement flawless self-presentation tactics, she became a much younger and more desirable woman through her disguise. Schechner's performance theory, in the form of social performance, is carried out through Muir's navigation of her crafted identity quite seamlessly. Adding more nuance to the tale of Jean Muir and social performance under a gendered lens, Alcott successfully captures how female characters in literature often navigate particularly complex relationships with the notion of metaphorical masking because of the socially constructed gendered impositions.

These curated behavioural patterns can further be observed in Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). As it explores these gendered expectations where women must adopt metaphorical masks to mitigate threatening social environments, through Emily's journey. We see her having to veil both her face and emotions to realise her ultimate goals. It becomes quite evident that social masking becomes an uncompromisable necessity to mediate between internal desires and external demands. These female protagonists displaying iterative acts of metaphorical masking to achieve certain goals once again highlighting that Schechner's argument on identity formation through performance is by no means innate and static, but a continuous process of adapting and transforming.

### 2.3.2 Threshold Experiences: Liminal Identities and Postcolonial Perspectives

Examining metaphorical masks outside the literary domain and within the real world, it acquires political dimensions in which it can operate as both an enforced disguise and as strategic resistance. This becomes more evident under the postcolonial perspective, where liminal spaces have been created in many cases, forcefully, as assigned by law, custom and convention of the ruling powers. This liminality resonates with Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the "Third Space", where hybrid subjectivities emerge from between opposing systems and cultural identities, more precisely, the dominant one seeping into the other in the guise of being the superior.

The resistance throughout postcolonial literature is seen to be carried out by the characters adopting strategic personas to navigate colonial power structures, while preserving interior spaces behind these metaphorical masks. By using these metaphorical masks to determine when, how, and to whom to appear, the marginalised can also gain control over self-representation, which in turn becomes a form of power (often through language, culture, and propriety as deemed superior by the powerful party in gaining their favour), as agents of change, as Sharrona Pearl explains masks to be. The crucial concept of the subaltern mask emerges from Gayatri Spivak's seminal work and question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), illuminating marginalised communities having to negotiate proper representation within hegemonic discourses. This aspect is attuned with Bharucha's criticism of Schechner, in which a universal standard for how performative identities and/or masking practices to navigate the world can spontaneously emerge. Postcolonial experiences would no doubt be vastly different from those that have not undergone similar instances, in terms of what it means to put on a survivalist and self-preserving mode of performance in creating liminal identities that borrow from what originally existed and what has been imposed.

Whether in colonial contexts, gender hierarchies, class division or power structures, metaphorical masks reveal how identity is not a fixed essence but an ongoing negotiation across thresholds of power dynamics, self-preservation and expression, or even defence mechanisms. It is important to regard masking practices from these different domains as not something that has a fixed equation of cause and effect. The very argument here is that identity formation in these cross-cultural and transdisciplinary arenas is to prove the multiplicity of possibilities that can emerge, not any particular one that will emerge. Therefore, these multicontextual experiences illustrate how masking practices, both literal and metaphorical, create spaces for the marginalised subjects to reconfigure the terms of their existence, representation, and identities. Proving once again, how masks simultaneously conceal and reveal, transform and preserve, liberate and constrain. In the following chapter, we dive deeper into the analytic aspect of masking practices across a broad cultural, historical and performative spectrum.

## Chapter 3: Analysis

### 3.1 The Beginnings - Historical Trajectories of the Mask

#### 3.1.1 Cultural Background of Masks

To keep something concealed or hidden would hint at how there is likely a reason behind it, how someone has assumed it to be necessary. This concealment could take multiple guises, and masking in its multitude of forms proves how it is a notion stemming from an individual or communal sense of necessity. Historically speaking, the use of masks was multifaceted across the globe. Not only for entertainment purposes, such as for theatre, performance, or spectacle, but for more practical uses as well. Such as concealing one's identity (for both ethical and not so ethical reasons) or preserving one's health from whatever disease particle lurks in the atmosphere (e.g. during the Black Death or the bubonic plague<sup>3</sup>). Despite the idea of concealing something, masks almost always “reveal” something else, be it an intention or the way they expose the vulnerability of the wearer.

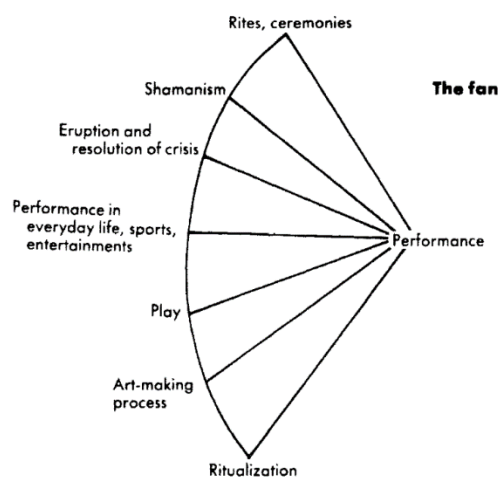


Figure 1 Richard Schechner, "The fan", *Performance Theory*, 1988, p.ix

As for the cultural aspect of the mask and its grandeur of usage over time, it is important to realise the significance it holds exceeds the visual aspect of it for many communities and even transcends the realms of spirituality in their beliefs. The term “performance” is heavily

<sup>3</sup> The Black Death, a devastating disease that swept through Europe and Asia in the 1300s, also referred to as the bubonic plague, was spread by fleas, rats and other critters. It caused painful swellings and fevers that often lead to death. (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/black-death>)

involved when discussing the cultural elements of masks, and it is even more interesting when viewed through the lenses of “Performance Theory” and Richard Schechner’s teachings. Schechner explains two modes of organising the world of performance in his *Performance Theory* (1988) – the fan (figure 1) and the web (figure 2). The fan is shown to be a spectrum that shows possible kinds of performance, such as rites, ceremonies, shamanism, play, performance in everyday life and modes of entertainment, etc. This mode is useful in understanding performance through a schematic approach.

On the other hand, the web focusses more on the hands-on experience of performance and how all the different possible genres can stay different but also be interconnected in some way. This is a rhizomatic<sup>4</sup> perspective, but practical in the sense that, according to Schechner,

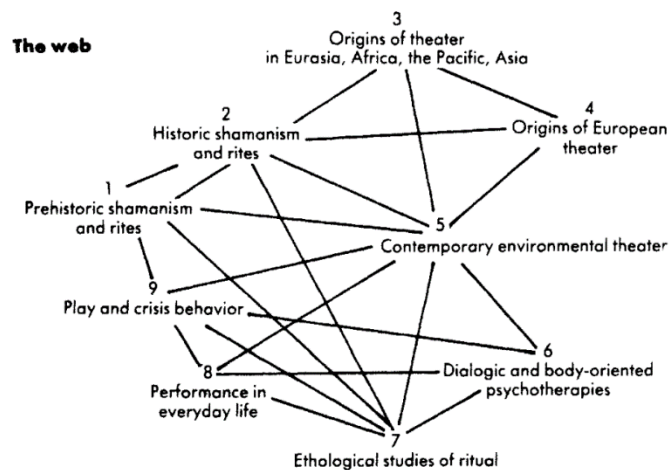


Figure 2 Richard Schechner, "The web", *Performance Theory*, 1988, p.ix

“Performance is an extremely difficult concept to define”, and “performing is a mode of behaviour that may characterize any activity. Thus, performance is a “quality” that can occur in *any* situation rather than a fenced-off genre.” (*Performance Theory*, p.29) - which shows that the interconnected web of performance may seem a disorganised mode of sorting out its different avenues for a better understanding, but there's certainly a method in the apparent disorderly ways.

<sup>4</sup> “The rhizome, they claim (Deleuze and Guattari), can help us to formulate some of the principles which describes all multiplicities as such beyond the botanical realm. As such, the rhizome is not a metaphor for something else (such as modes of social organization), but it is a concept which aims to offer a more radical understanding of ontological processes as dynamic and mutating assemblages.” (oxfordreference.com)

The concept of the mask or masking falls quite neatly into the performance theory, if not fit into it like a glove. That is to say, the aspect of transformation through a performing action renders the use of both physical and conceptual masks a quintessential tool. The mask creates a visible shift, to be certain, but the human performer remains underneath and creates the illusion of something that did not exist prior. The illusion might as well be part of the spectacle of any staged performance (especially in theatre, which will be discussed extensively in the following chapter regarding the literary roots of masks). Yet, for many cultural and ritualistic practices, the usage of masks in their performative aspects is what facilitates a sacred link between humans and the spirit.

Schechner explores one such community in his *Performance Theory* as well. Speaking of the Elema people of New Guinea. The Elema celebrate a cycle called “Hevehe” and prepare 30-foot-high masks representing spirits they believe look over them and grant them prosperity and safety. The masks are majestic, and the process is long, lasting anywhere from six to twenty years to complete each cycle of celebrations. The masks are then used in the performances, keeping two things in mind: one, that the masks are believed to be living things, and two, that the men underneath the masks are separate from the masks. The masks do not contain or represent the spirits but are believed to “be” the spirits, and after the ceremony, are burnt to ashes to return to their realms. A symbolic act of returning to a natural order of the two distinct worlds.

Similar practices can be observed in many different cultures in West Africa, e.g., in the Yoruba and Dogon tribes, where masks are central to many rituals, as they represent deities, ancestors, or spirits that govern avenues of nature. Many of the rituals include ceremonies of initiation, harvest and agricultural blessings, funerals and a great deal of other communal festivities and practices. In central Africa, particularly the Kuba and Pende tribes, masks are used for the initiation of young men as they venture into adulthood. The masks represent powerful and

legendary ancestors, mythical figures and deities, to bestow blessings on the youth in their upcoming obstacles as “men” who will take charge and responsibilities of their tribe. In some of the different Indigenous American cultures in the Northwest Coast (e.g., Tlingit, Haida), masks are often used in “potlatches”, which are a type of winter feast arranged to bring the community together. These masks represent animal spirits and mythological beings of their faith and are usually carved by hand with intricate patterns and painted over to add a dramatic visage to them. In the Southwest Coast, the Hopi and Zuni tribes, among a few others, “kachina” masks represent spirits who are believed to bring rain and well-being to their communities, while also being a symbol of fertility and good health. These masks are prepared and worn by dancers in specific ceremonies to invoke specific boons throughout the year. This very concept of masks and spiritual connection that can be channelled through them is something that has seen parallels globally across different cultures, indicating a pattern that emerges independently but shows similarity.

In *The Way of the Masks* (1975), Claude Lévi-Strauss explores the concept further, seeking the meaning and function of masks, particularly through the Native American people of the Northwest Coast. He describes his long-standing fascination with Northwest Coast art, which initiated his interest in the matter. Focussing particularly on a specific type of mask that presented an enigma to him. Due to its unusual, seemingly ill-suited design. It had large protruding features, usually a gaping mouth and tongue, sometimes using the motifs of bird heads, and bulging eyes. It hardly seemed practical, even as masks representing deities or mythical creatures, because they were hardly even comfortable to wear during ceremonies and performances, quite the contrary. These masks represent John Bell’s concept of the centre of gravity no longer remaining on the wearer, as the attributed features are not made to be humanoid, and so the mask becomes its own entity with its own centre of gravity. Which is, by design done purposefully, given that they are

created specifically to invoke the unseen into the human world, Strauss felt it important to explore these intriguing masks and why they were so important to these tribes. He rejects the interpretations of isolated objects and instead proposes a structuralist approach, arguing that a mask's meaning derives from its systemic relationship with other masks and that their social or religious functions are through transformative aspects, linked to their physical forms, despite being ill-suited or uncomfortable to wear, because being comfortable to wear simply was not the motive to make them that way.

His central hypothesis centres around the fact that the relationships between masks and their origin or myths will mirror the visual relationships between the masks themselves. To demonstrate this, he outlines a methodology of comprehensively studying the puzzling mask type, including its aesthetics, fabrication, use, and origin myths, before comparing it to other masks to uncover underlying structural relationships. In essence, this would mean the masks were not designed a specific way because they looked nice, or visually appealing, or even had a reasonably comfortable structure, but more so, it was important for the masks to be made from the concept or myths that they originated from, and that took precedence over the aesthetics or comfort.

Lévi-Strauss's case study focusses primarily on the masks of tribes, including Tlingit, Haida, Kwakiutl and Tsimshian. The structuralist argument builds on how these cultures use masks to depict animals such as ravens, eagles, bears, wolves etc. and mythical creatures including the "thunderbird" or sea monsters; human representation in these masks includes ancestors and previous chiefs of the tribes - all being not mere depictions, but rather mediators of sorts between the different realms of existence as perceived by the tribesmen. For instance, animal masks are mediators between the human and natural world, embodying the characteristics of animals (e.g., the keen vision of a hawk or the strength of a bear or a wolf). The ancestral masks mediate between

the human world and the deceased, connecting the community of the present to those of the past, keeping a strong sense of lineage alive. Mythical masks mediate the human world with the mystical and spiritual, even connecting the supernatural to the community through the masks in a way that reinforces their cultural narratives and beliefs.

The discussion thus far shows how Schechner focusses more on the performative aspect and Lévi-Strauss on the structuralist aspect. In *Masks and Masking: Faces of Tradition and Belief Worldwide*, Gary Edson shares his thoughts on how studies of masks have more often than not, even within the narrow academic scopes, overemphasise the object itself. Neglecting the crucial activities and contexts surrounding its use in the process. This, according to Edson, leads to interpretations based on contemporary assumptions rather than the mask's original cultural significance.

That is because this single-perspective approach essentially overlooks the underlying dynamic amongst three key figures surrounding the mask: the maker or the artisan, the user or wearer, and the viewer or the audience. Their collective influences together determine the mask's purpose or need for its production, the meaning behind it, and its overall intended function within a specific social and historical framework. Therefore, a complete understanding of masks then requires shifting said single-perspective focus from the static object to the dynamic interplay of these three roles and the cultural practices that give the mask its true meaning. Paralleling Maurice Merleau-Ponty's body schema as explained in *Phenomenology of Perception*. The attributes of what the result looks like upon the mask's usage are not simply the object being layered over a face that is now hidden, but the combination of the wearer's lived body experience, where the mask becomes an extension of their body within the space the wearer occupies in the world, along with the perception of those who view them. And of course, as Edson suggests, the maker of the

mask is also included in this concoction of cultural cocktail. Essentially so, because it is only through the implemented ideas, concepts, beliefs, and intended purpose that a mask takes physical form through the artisan's talented hands.

*Venice Incognito: Masks in the Serene Republic*, by James H. Johnson focusses on the festive side of masks, which has its own social performative aspects, deviating slightly from the ritualistic aspect of their use as seen in the different tribal cultures. Johnson mentions how, for him, the interest in Venetian masks in particular had initially stemmed from a fascination with carnivals and the conventional understanding of masks as symbols of freedom and anonymity. In 18<sup>th</sup>-century Venice, the use of masks extended beyond the designated carnival season, revealing a complex social reality full of communal and individual performances through the vibrant facades associated with the city's eccentric masks. Scrying further had revealed to Johnson the significance of masks in Venice as they were used for a variety of social and cultural occasions throughout about half of the year, not only for carnivals and spectacles.

This would include settings such as formal state affairs; personal or public gatherings, theatrical performances in community halls, especially on occasions such as masquerade balls and parties, and, at times, even during mundane daily interactions between people. Performance here, therefore, is practised in a spectrum. As Schechner's models of the fan or the web might suggest, the practice of performance in this way adds to the possibilities of masking rather than its limitations as just a tool of disguise. This widespread practice challenges the simplistic association of masks with the carnival's supposed atmosphere of social inversion and revelry. The usage of these masks ranged further, as many aristocratic and rich nobles were known and oftentimes even expected to wear masks during unethical dealings, or while visiting the red-light district to conceal their identities.

The notion of this successful nature of hiding one's identity certainly added to the hierarchy of Venice's social structure at the time, playing into the carnivalesque nature as Bakhtin explains it. An exposed identity would not allow for many people to interact beyond their assigned stations, but the mask allowed the Venetians to topple said hierarchy in a sort of controlled chaos within the domain of the carnivalesque. Of all the domains a mask can slip into and carry on its role in performance or ritual, even in festivities and self-preservation, the common thing remains a state of transformation. The masks allow their wearer to transcend an existing identity and become a performer for the sake of entertainment, spirituality, and cultural narratives, and even to topple hierarchies in a controlled environment.

### **3.2 Masks as Transformative Objects from Theatrical Tradition to Literary**

#### **Representation**

#### **3.2.1 Masks as Performing Objects**

As explored by John Bell in *Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects*, masks have served as performing objects in some of the oldest forms of performance and entertainment around the globe. The term "performing object" was first used by Frank Proshan, in his article, "The Semiotic Study of Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects" (1983) to refer to "material images" that resembled humans, animals, or even spirits to be displayed and manipulated in different narratives, storytelling and dramatic performances. Seeking these roots in literature leads us, without fail, to theatrical performances. Traditionally, in ancient Greek theatre, masks were not simply used as accessories, but also as an irreplaceable and essential tool to flesh out the attributes of the narratives and emotions of the characters on stage. It was important to have the essence of the portrayed character be conveyed perfectly, as a mode of transforming into the character and forgetting the

wearer's own identity for the time being. As Katheryne Boshier explains this phenomenon in *Greek Theater in Ancient Sicily* (2021), describing the extraordinary similarity of the masks and the costumes of portrayed characters, particularly Zeus and Dionysus, in a comic play from the 4th century BCE. Questioning if they are in fact “replicated gods” (p. 67). Which is to say, the replication was a form of invoking the essence of those that are to be portrayed, in this case, powerful gods and figures from Olympus. The wearer, in a form of what may at present day be compared to method acting, lives as the portrayed character in that very moment, the mask becoming a part of them, integrating into their body schema.

In many of these plays, they<sup>5</sup> would often invoke recurring characters, especially the muses Melpomene and Thalia<sup>6</sup>. In which Melpomene is the muse of tragedy and Thalia of comedy. A similar practice can also be seen in the Japanese Hannya<sup>7</sup> and Noh theatrical masks, as they depict extreme rage, sorrow, and suffering in a very exaggerated manner. These masks' visual and symbolic potency can draw a connection between the performer and the spectator in a way that perhaps human facial expressions simply won't allow, due to the biological limitations of the human physiognomy. Yet, the audience certainly feels the emotional extremity as expressed through these visuals, demonstrating how the internal domain of understanding in humans transcends the physical limitations of the body.

However, the gradual dissemination of classical Greek theatrical conventions throughout the Mediterranean basin during the Hellenistic and Roman periods, had ensured that masks were

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<sup>5</sup> Dramatists including Thucydides and Euripides would often invoke the muse Thalia for their comedy plays (<https://histos.org/index.php/histos/article/view/107>)

<sup>6</sup> <https://aact.org/masks-comedy-and-tragedy>

<sup>7</sup> “The hannya mask has an open mouth, strong jaw, sharp teeth, golden eyes, and two horns. Its expression is simultaneously demonic, angry, frightening, tormented, and sorrowful.” ([www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/814908](http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/814908))

persistently present in performance. Although it went through significant regional adaptations and innovations. Once again highlighting the ability of masks having the ability of multiplicity, transformation and potential to adapt and change. Despite these changes, theatrical masks associated with Melpomene and Thalia helped formalise facial expressiveness to serve as potent semiotic systems for emotional codification in performative contexts. Even when the physical mask eventually became absent (or obsolete) in more contemporary practices of performance and theatre. Undergoing complex historical transformations while still retaining the initial purpose and functionality, we see these classical principles of masking traditions seep into the Mediaeval European performance traditions. Especially noteworthy would be the liturgical dramas and secular carnival festivities, infusing them with Christian symbolism and vernacular cultural elements.

Then, the later 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in European theatre introduced us to two prominent theatrical traditions that still used masks as similar performative objects. The first being the *Commedia dell'Arte* and the second being melodrama<sup>8</sup>. *Commedia dell'Arte* started its roots during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries in Northern Italy, yet it truly began to flourish well into the 18<sup>th</sup> century throughout Europe, eventually finding quite a bit of success and popularity in France as well. Masks were used to convey exaggerated features and emotions in an attempt to allow the audience to instantly recognise existing and distinct characters of this particular theatre. For instance, the cunning Harlequin, the scheming Pantalone, and the naïve and sweet Colombina are all well-known and fleshed-out characters of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, and their masks would easily fit their character traits visually, enabling them to shape their identities on stage in a visually striking manner. Other characters include Pulcinella, Dottore, Capitano, etc. Interestingly,

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zhhrf4j/revision/5>

however, during the Napoleonic occupation of Italy, this form of theatre was outlawed<sup>9</sup> and banned, seemingly because of its free-form improvisation with stock characters. It was then later revived in Venice around the 19<sup>th</sup> century and finds a niche audience for the art form even today.

On the other hand, melodrama was not at all reliant on physical masks as *Commedia dell'Arte* was, and often employed masked identities and hidden truths instead to carry out the narratives. Characters would often assume false personas or conceal their true intentions, creating dramatic tension for the plot. This metaphorical masking allowed for the exploration of themes such as societal hypocrisy, moral ambiguity, and, of course, the duality of human nature. Characters in melodrama were often archetypes, including heroes and villains, which made it crucial for the audience to grasp their intentions almost immediately without much effort. The use of clear and loud vocal delivery and exaggerated facial expressions played an essential role in this understanding. Pantomime, a form of silent theatre, is another example that often uses masks to convey the emotional aspect of the character on stage in the absence of dialogue. This tradition continued into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in Britain.

In both these modes of theatrical performances, it is not only about performing alone, as in one's own. The masked performer and the unmasked audience both have roles to play in this dynamic. As both Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gary Edson's ideas show, the performer, the performing object, the audience, and even the space taken are all equally important in this equation to understand the complete picture. Even in a slightly different setting where staged divisions are not so apparent, rather the performance becomes a communal matter; it can even become a festive thing.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.worldmime.org/en/about-mime/liaisons/101-liaisons/257-commedia-dell-arte.html>

This is what segues to the notion of carnival or the carnivalesque<sup>10</sup>. Venice has long been associated with and even synonymous with masks, carnivals and masquerades. The entire ordeal creates a rich tapestry of human experience, and in *Venice Incognito: Masks in the Serene Republic*, James H. Johnson explores exactly that. The Venetian carnivals, celebrated annually, are characterised by elaborate and festive masks, a tradition that dates back to the Middle Ages<sup>11</sup>. Exploring performative identities in this setting allows us to realise how the natives adorn said masks during the carnival, effectively suspending their individual identities and social hierarchies through this shared mode of freedom. Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque connects deeply through this concept, as it celebrates the notion of subverting the established order through humour and chaos. Masking here transcends the concept of deception or disguise and becomes more so a transformative act of unifying a community under the same guise. Dissolving the barriers of personal discrepancies, concealing them not to create differences but to create a sense of liberating disorder. Proving once more the multivalent capacities of the mask in creating possibilities of transformation in multiple arenas, even outside the purely theatrical.

### 3.2.2 Literary Case Studies

Masks in literature have been used and utilised in both tangible forms and more conceptual ones. One thing remains certain in both cases, though. The ordeal of masking always has to do with identities, either being concealed or constructed, and even transformed. As we take literary case studies from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries into account, it becomes evident how the narratives surrounding a masked identity can emerge out of personal agendas and societal demands. The

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<sup>10</sup> "Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian linguist and literary critic writing in the first half of the 20th century, used this term to characterize writing that depicts the de-stabilization or reversal of power structures, albeit temporarily, as happens in traditional forms of carnival." (www.oxfordreference.com)

<sup>11</sup> 500 to 1500 A.D (www.oxfordreference.com)

metaphorical mask, much like its tangible counterpart, can hide the individual's true self behind layers of constructed details and attributes. Sharrona Pearl explains in *Masks* how there's an overlap between "[R]itual, performance, representation and exposure" (8) in its use depending on the circumstance. Yet, in all these different cases where the mask supposedly succeeds in its assigned role of concealing something, there's still a failure that lingers somewhere, she says., even though masks enable and provide both literal and metaphorical covers for that which "we wish to ignore, obscure, hide" from ourselves or others, be it in the guise of performance, it still reveals something about the wearer and those that witness the mask as it is being worn.

In *The Phantom of the Opera* (1909), by Gaston Leroux, we see how the use of a tangible mask serves multiple purposes. First and foremost, it most certainly serves as a physical concealment, hiding the phantom's disfigured face. But also, creating a psychological projection of a mysterious, monstrous and veiled persona. The fact that the mask is worn as a sort of shield in a way, signifies the notion of a state that isn't considered normal and has to therefore be hidden so others may not see and despise him for how he appears without it, which is a concept that adds to the psychological defence the mask provides. This clearly emphasises the body schema of Erik having been compromised. Even though the mask he wears is able to let him hide certain visual truths, it has integrated with his very being so deeply that the mask has successfully infiltrated his place in the world, taking some of it for itself, becoming a part of his lived experience. Therefore, disrupting the body schema of the wearer, as explained by Merleau Ponty. In this way, even though it signifies concealment, it also signifies transformation through hiding away his otherwise "disturbing" features he wishes to conceal from others.

In a more conceptual sense of masking, we see Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 1890) and his portrait that serves both as a literal and physical mask. It reflects his

true self, all the while he indulges in a life of sin. Even without the ageing portrait, Dorian Gray skillfully attunes himself with a carefully crafted social mask, integrating the social performance aspect of Schechner's performance theory in order to conceal his true nature and manipulate those around him. All the while playing the role of a charming and innocent young man. A similar use of innocence and even piety as a guise reflecting metaphorical masks is seen in Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). Many a great deal of work in the Gothic genre of literature does not shy away from employing the concept of masking in both a literal and figurative sense. At times, however, the use of a mask can even become associated with a larger concept, going beyond an individual persona or character and their agendas.

For instance, in *The Black Death* (2016) by Henry Freeman, he mentions the "Plague Doctor" during the 2nd wave of the black death in the 17th century. The plague doctor's use of a full-face mask with a beak-like nose that carried aromatic herbs and plants to keep out the "bad air". The image of the plague doctor itself has a lingering connotation of death and disease. It symbolises fear, desperation and a time of crisis. The design of the mask at the time was, of course, to the best of their understanding, practical, yet the distinct persona that it manages to create with its striking visuals and the emotions that it evokes when seen has immortalised the persona associated with the plague doctor mask and aesthetic in art and literature. The plague doctor mask here acts as a performing object. In which it does not have humanoid features, and is so distinctively something else (modelled after birdlike features but not quite a bird), it is what John Bell would describe as a performing object that has developed its own centre of gravity. Having an aura of its own, even today, from the perception it invokes in the viewer, and no doubt invoked within those who wore it.

Michael Jecks in “A Plague on Your Business”, which is a short story from an anthology of historical fiction titled *By the Sword*, gives a different aspect of the black death waves and the use of masks by the common folk. The story centres around a man named Berenger who loses his wife and son to the plague. The mention of makeshift masks using fabric or old cloth to prevent inhaling the bad air, highlights the use of masks in a more literal sense of a protective measure. Effectivity aside, it acted as a barrier between the sick and dying and those who were alive and hoping to stay that way. This particular mask is one that serves a survivalist purpose, adding once more to the multivalent aspect of the mask. Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Mask of the Red Death* captures a similar essence. The story revolves around Prince Prospero’s attempt to escape death with a group of guests, as the “red death” was ravaging the kingdom. We see a masquerade being held behind the security provided by the prince to his guests, the elaborate masks attempt to hide not just their identities but the fear of death and demise that lingered just beneath. The elaborate ball was a futile attempt to create a false sense of security, when eventually the grim reality had caught up to the opulent halls of the ball. The mysterious cloaked figure in red, a harbinger of death, eventually makes it to the event and takes their lives. Rendering the futility of the prince's and his guests' actions to hide behind a guise of normalcy and cheer.

Examples of a more imposed nature of masking identities due to societal pressure can be seen in works such as Louisa May Alcott’s *Behind a Mask* (1866). We see her protagonist, Jean Miur, use both physical and metaphorical disguises to compel those around her and realise her agenda. She navigates the Coventry household, disguising herself as a young, beautiful woman hired to be the governess of Bella, the young girl of the estate. Feigning dizzy spells and using fake teeth and a wig, she manages to charm the male characters quite effortlessly. The fact of the matter remains that she did all these things because of the societal expectations put on women of

the then-Victorian era. Alcott employs this concept of deception and performance in social settings as per societal expectations, also through the fact of her publishing the book under the guise of a male author in 1866, as “A.M. Alcott”, so the publishing journey would pose less of a hassle.

The close inspection of masks as material and metaphorical apparatuses to shift, transform, and bifurcate identities within specific historical trajectories and performative practices in this chapter successfully highlights their liminal capacities once more. Adding to the notion of masks being attributed to multiplicity, and not being a pivotal device that in any way unifies experiences. But rather, allows for possibilities to emerge and transformations to take place. We now pivot towards a visual approach in the upcoming chapter to accommodate what W.J.T. Mitchell identifies as “the pictorial turn”. A shift that is perhaps necessary to accommodate a visual dimension of understanding for the aesthetic side of material masks and their functionality across the platform and cultural circumstances in which they are used.

## **Chapter 4: Iconographic Representations in Cultural Performance and Identity Construction**

The idea of a mask is easy to visualise; simply hearing the word can evoke an image for most people. That is to say, the signifier “mask” successfully signifies a particular visual in most people’s minds, depending on which part of the spectrum between aphantasia<sup>12</sup> and hyperphantasia<sup>13</sup> a person’s internal visual capabilities fall under. This implies that the concept of a mask is, without a doubt, one with a visual attribute to it, even before it is established in a sentence, whether or not the mask in question holds a physical form or is a metaphorical one. This chapter attempts to highlight the said visual aspect of the enigma that is a mask, through exploring its uses in different domains in culture, performance and the arts. Connecting it all in the end to the fact that upon their use, an identity is formed that differs from the one who wears it.

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<sup>12</sup> A condition in which someone is unable to form pictures in their imagination.  
([dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/aphantasia](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/aphantasia))

<sup>13</sup> Refers to one’s ability to conjure up life-like, realistic mental images, sounds, and other senses with the mind's eye or imagination. ([www.actualized.org/forum/topic/98330-why-you-shouldn't-try-to-silence-your-mind/](https://www.actualized.org/forum/topic/98330-why-you-shouldn't-try-to-silence-your-mind/))

## 4.1 Spirit masks

“Spirit masks”, generally associated with a great number of African cultures, are worn in faith to embody and bring different supernatural spirits during traditional rituals and ceremonies. These masks are, more often than not, and intentionally so, created to look distorted and bizarre with angular shapes and sometimes dynamic patterns drawn on them. The said “spirits” channelled through these masks are usually guiding, protecting and helping entities from nature or higher realms, as believed in the African culture.

However, similar beliefs and practices exist in other cultures as well. For instance, figure 5 is a carved wood spirit mask used in Shamanic rituals in Alaska, North America. Similar masks are used in their culture during ritual dances to bring about good luck in hunting sessions and collective good health. Figure 4 depicts a 10<sup>th</sup> century horned forest spirit mask from the Kuba kingdom in Africa. Spirit masks are often created with natural materials such as wood, plant fibres or cloth to greatly emphasise the connection to nature and the spirits that dwell in it.



*Figure 5 Carved wooden 'Spirit mask'. Front view, Sir Henry Wellcome's Museum Collection*



*Figure 4 Horned Forest Spirit Mask, 10th century, Kuba, Wood, cloth, copper, pigment, plant fibers*



*Figure 3 Ancestor Spirit Mask, UBC Museum of Anthropology*

Apart from natural spirits, these masks can also be used to connect with the deceased or ancestors in many tribal faiths. Even though spirit masks in the image of natural spirits are usually with a more geometric shape or markings that represent their otherworldliness in a way, ancestor spirit masks are also depicted similarly to pay homage to their spirits becoming more than their once-human existence.

## 4.2 Theatre Masks

From ancient Greek theatre to contemporary performances, masks have been a significant ally in the art of stage performances for centuries. Originating from a festival honouring the Greek god of wine, Dionysus, Greek theatre was meant to entertain a large-scale audience. This meant that masks were not only a creative choice but also a necessary one to exaggerate and accentuate the features of the characters on stage for the audience in the open-air large auditoriums to see clearly, or at least be able to distinguish one character from the other from a far view.



Figure 6 "Theatre Masks", 6th-5th century BCE, Part of: Erich Lessing Culture and Fine Arts Archives



Figure 7 Comic mask, Greek, possibly Attic. late 4th–3rd century BCE

Unfortunately, though, any "true" masks worn in Greek theatre or even created during this time for said purpose do not survive at present. Largely because they were made with perishable

material, such as stiffened linen or fabric, sometimes wood, to make the masks lightweight as they covered the entirety of the actors' heads (in part due to keeping full secrecy on their identities to avoid any political ramifications). Some terracotta or carved masks still survive to this day (fig. 6, 7) in part due to many of them not being worn and being offerings dedicated to temples.

That very intention for theatre performance can also be seen in various troupes. A keen example can be seen in the masks worn by actors in the Commedia dell'arte. As discussed in previous chapters, this special troupe theatre has a range of pre-established characters that have distinguishable features and personalities (e.g. Capitano, Tartaglia, Columbina, Arlecchino, etc.), and so the masks used to represent the characters resemble their established personas through the engraved features (fig. 9).



Figure 9 Commedia dell'arte masks by Alice Nelson, [alicenelson.ca](http://alicenelson.ca)



Figure 8 Noh Mask: Kojo (Old Man), Edo period (1615–1868)

Similar instances can be seen in the Japanese Noh<sup>14</sup> masks, which are surprisingly supposed to be devoid of emotions, rather, devoid of one particular emotion, and convey multiple

<sup>14</sup> “In Japanese, a face devoid of expression is described as “noh-mask like.” Indeed, at first glance, noh masks may appear to be expressionless. But that is because they express various emotions knitted together in a complex form.” ([https://noh-kyogen.com/global/en/noh\\_mask\\_and\\_shozoku/index.html](https://noh-kyogen.com/global/en/noh_mask_and_shozoku/index.html))

emotions at once, that too very effectively. This is so since the Noh theatre plays are usually quite long, and the masks conveying the multiple emotions so keenly aid the actors to take advantage of whichever one is needed at the moment. These masks have quite a few categories, from humans to demons, gods and spirits, animals and local deities.

### 4.3 Painted Faces

Painted faces are a fascinating extension of the concept of masks and masking, while using living canvases. Creating a persona with a coat of paint and streaks can be incredibly versatile. For instance, miming uses the illusion of movements with the body as a “centre”, and all that is outside is the open stage for a mime. The mask here is the mime’s distinctive cast of white paint and streaks of black that is easily recognisable as someone performing as one (e.g., fig. 12), not only creating a persona of a specific type of performer but also creating an imaginary world through their movements and gestures, even though it restricts the use of language altogether.



Figure 12 Mime performing "The Dog", Don Gallo



Figure 11 Close up view of face of male dancer with yellow/red face paint and elaborate headdress. Colour slides 496-503, Mekeo people, Papua New Guinea. 1944-1966



Figure 10 Hong Kong. 1984. Performers from the Chinese Opera backstage.

This notion of painted faces as masks is a significant way of self-expression in many cultures, as well as in theatre. In many African tribes, face paint is used as a sign of beauty, or for religious, ritual, or celebratory purposes (e.g., fig. 11). Some markings are permanent, akin to tattoos, signifying class, strength and status. In theatre, however, face paint is usually used strategically, making use of colours and distinctive features to mark the character traits and personality

#### **4.4 Paintings**

Now, taking a look at the avenue of fine arts to find representational value of our discourse surrounding masks and masking practices, we see an abundance of examples. Lorenzo Lippi's "Allegory of Simulation" (1640) is a piece that has long been the subject of different interpretations. Particularly because of the mask in the hand of the central subject (who has often been speculated to be Thalia, the muse of comedy by art lovers and critics alike) instead of being worn on her face, raising the question of what the purpose it holds at all if not being donned as a guise. The painting epitomises the "Baroque" art style, where the work is often presented with multiple and detailed points of visual interest, without giving an absolute meaning and leaving room for elaborate speculations instead. This adds to the fluidity of meaning, existence and identity provided by the mask, even when not put on by the woman in the painting.

Figure 15 is a painting titled "Ensor aux masques" (1899) by James Ensor. While it isn't uncommon amongst artists to capture themselves on canvas in the form of self-portraits, this particular piece by Ensor provides more than just a mirror image of its creator. Through its self-representational examination of identity, surrounded by grotesque carnival masks, the painting

creates a visual field of boundaries that draws a line between the known and the vast unknown. Only the self is unmasked, while others remain veiled under their masked guises. Figure 13 is a very interesting pick. Given the almost unavoidable nature of its relevance in this discourse after being referenced on multiple occasions in earlier chapters under the literary examples, Ivan Albright's "Picture of Dorian Gray" (1943-44) was commissioned for the 1945 live-action adaptation of Oscar Wilde's book. It showcases the grisly "after" version of Dorian Gray, a fantastic work of macabre that depicts Gray's body itself turning into a mask of decay and decomposition within the painting.



Figure 15 James Ensor, *Ensor aux masques*, 1899. Huile sur toile, 120 x 80 cm. Menard Art Museum, Komaki, Japon.



Figure 13 Ivan Albright, *Picture of Dorian Gray, "After" version*. 1943–44



Figure 14 Lorenzo Lippi, *Allégorie de la simulation*, vers 1640. Huile sur toile, 73 x 89 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Angers.

Collectively, these pieces demonstrate how masking is almost always more than what meets the eye. Through these aesthetic strategies spanning over three centuries, the artists and the

paintings still convey and articulate a universal truth about the masks - the capacities they hold acting as agents of change, negotiating and playing a crucial part in understanding, forming, and reforming identity in performative, cultural, psychological, and contextually mediated arenas.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

### 5.1 Unmasking the Liminal

This thesis has attempted to interrogate the ontological significance of masks and masking practices across literary, cultural and historical avenues to highlight their liminal and multivalent capacities for creating and concealing identities. Taking on a transdisciplinary approach, the research traverses through anthropological, literary and performance studies to establish masks as critical theoretical devices in understanding the performative dimensions of identity construction through the processes of negotiation, self-expression, retaliation and inevitably transformation. The theoretical framework development in this thesis positions masks as liminal objects. Existing in an intersectional state between visibility and invisibility, presence and absence, authenticity and artifice, a state of flux where the masked performer is neither fully themselves nor completely the character they are portraying. Facilitating a rhizomatic construct that nullifies and destabilises binary structures of thinking and being. This conceptualisation has been extended beyond masks as material artefacts to further encompass their metaphorical counterparts. Drawing from Schechner's performance theory and demonstrating how masks successfully operate within these created liminal spaces to make identity a malleable, permeable, reconfigurable thing.

The mask, therefore, acts as an apparatus through which we can analyse and comprehend the performative nature of all identities. As observed by Claude Lévi-Strauss, in *The Way of the Mask* (1988), masks exist within semiotic networks. A network woven from the interconnections with the wearer, the audience or spectators, and the cultural, historical contexts. It is indeed an intricate dance of signification where the nature of identity becomes fluid and contingent.

## 5.2 Key Findings

The analysis of this research has revealed a comprehensive understanding that masks, both material artefacts and theoretical manifestations, have significant contributions to the formation of identity.

The research analyses ritual and spiritual masking practices among diverse cultural contexts, revealing their functional transformative capabilities to mediate between the human and otherworldly realms. The investigation of theatrical masks from ancient Greek theatre to the Japanese Noh, or from the Commedia del'Arte to carnival masks in Venetian festivities, has shed light on the performative nature of embodying a different persona, guise or even anonymity upon their usage. Extending the investigation into the literary arena and the representation of masks and masking has revealed that characters and their identities are created, concealed, solidified, and even destabilised through the fluid nature of masking practices employed by these characters.

From Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death", to Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, or from Lereoux's *The Phantom of the Opera*, to Alcott's *Behind a Mask*, we find that literary examples successfully embody, employ and act as perfect sources to understand how masks not only conceal the existence of the original person's "self", but rather hosts an ongoing process of identity formation that may not always be for the most righteous of reasons.

It is crucial to realise how both aspects of concealment and revelation go through careful selectivity, depending on which aspect the wearer wants to amplify or omit. The illusion of choice in this regard is explored in the thesis through threshold experiences where hybrid subjectivities can emerge between opposing systems and cultural identities, as the dominant one seeps into the other in the guise of being the superior. This adds a psychological dimension to masking practices,

highlighting how masks can often be used as instruments of imposed identities while simultaneously being a tool for resistance in the form of hybrid identities.

### **5.3 Methodological Contributions, Limitations, Dilemmas**

This research has employed a transdisciplinary approach to combine a close textual analysis, theoretical synthesis, and iconographic interpretation to draw connections across disparate domains. The purpose is to trace the transformative, performative capacities of masking traditions across their material and metaphorical existence. By consciously traversing through disciplinary, temporal, and geographical boundaries, this research reveals what might be helpful to term as conceptual migrations of masking practices. The goal is to explore how the mask successfully travels across contexts, while carrying underlying complex cultural associations, and acquiring new significations along its way. These migrations would remain invisible, “masked” even, within the confines of a narrowly defined study. Essentially, it obscures the transformative processes through which masking practices evolve across contexts within rigid categorisations. This methodological expansiveness enables the research to trace the mask’s theoretical evolution from material artefact to conceptual framework, demonstrating how masking practices inform theoretical constructs of identity across diverse contexts.

However, this research is not without or above limitations, for the breadth of contexts analysed and examined still requires a selective necessity. Therefore, it remains incomplete in the sense that a gap remains to be filled. Addressing said gap creates a scope for future trajectories to examine contemporary masking practices in an age of digital media (e.g., virtual avatars, online personas, social media identities, artificial intelligence/AI-generated characters powered by

LLMs<sup>15</sup>, etc.). The dilemma of drawing from these newer modes of identity creation not only arises from the lack of adequate scholarly sources conducted on the matter, but also from the fact that at present we are in a liminal space ourselves, in just where exactly these digital fluidities stand. Fluctuations and instability are still very present in this arena before having a state where solid information can be verified and drawn from this blooming technological avenue.

#### **5.4 Concluding remarks**

To conclude, this research has investigated the multifaceted phenomenology of masks and masking practices across literary, cultural and historical avenues. Facilitating a transdisciplinary approach to unveil the mask's unique capacity to mediate as a theoretical device, to negotiate, create, obscure and transform identities across the labyrinth of human existence. As masks allow for their wearers to reimagine themselves within complex sociocultural environments, to an audience, and even to themselves.

The study's contribution, therefore, lies in establishing masks as liminal interfaces. As it proves to be a threshold space where forms of selfhood can emerge, albeit not necessarily always by one's will, but through culturally, traditionally, artistically, or self-sustainingly motivated performances. Through a comprehensive transdisciplinary approach, the analysis follows identity construction across literary, cultural and historical avenues, establishing mask-wearing as a lived experience, and not merely a tool for disguise. The mask, therefore, acts as its own foil in its role as both a mirror and a veil. Ultimately, revealing one of the most fundamental aspects of human nature, where identity is a paradoxical state of selective concealment and revelation of not only

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<sup>15</sup> Large Language Models, used to train speech patterns in AI. ([ieeexplore.ieee.org/document/10433480](https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/document/10433480))

who we are, who we think we are, who we are perceived as by others, and who we have the potential to become.

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