The Face of An/Other?
An Exploration of Boundaries in The Face of Another and its Pervasive Resonance

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Abstract
The text guides us through the many meanings that the or a face can have, with a critical analysis of the novel The Face of Another by Kobo Abe. In the process, it becomes clear how emotions such as disgust and shame change not only our perceptions of others, but also of ourselves. The article also questions the idea of demarcation and navigates the intertwining of boundaries in both personal and public space.

Title
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Literature, Knowledge Transfer, Emotions, Social Boundaries, Memory and Trauma

Kōbō Abe’s surrealist novel, »The Face of Another« revolves around the glaring idea of nature, and identity, revealing the canker eating away the soul, »the fundamental emptiness of content«1 of the modern man.

The story revolves around a chemist who, (in a certain Frankensteinian strain) disfigures his face in an experiment. Ashamed, he tries to reintegrate into society as well as win the affection of his wife through the aid of a prosthetic mask provided by his doctor. The employment of the mask, however, allows him to delve deep into what appears to be at the surface. He records his stories in a series of notebooks, and as readers/voyeurs, we gain access to his process of thoughts.

The novel problematizes the idea of identity through the various ruminations of the narrator – is what you think to be in reality your real face, or is what you think to be your real face really a face? – allowing one to ponder over this overstepping of boundaries, the spilling of the personal into the public, the mundane into the unique.

In this essay, I will explore the contours of boundaries shaped through the ideas of disgust and shame and how the use of masks/surgeries/augmentations serves to diminish such affects.

How do we, or when do we stop making sense of boundaries? How far are voyeuristic practices ethical?

These are some of the questions I will ruminate over in my essay.

»Too Little Face, Too Much Longing«

Emmanuel Lévinas writes, »It would seem that the human individual should be thought of first within the formal framework of his belonging to a genus- the human genus. He is part of a whole, divided into species and culminating in an undivided unity, in the logically ultimate identity of the individual, situated among empirical data and recognizable by specific spatial and temporal indices, in which that unity presents itself as a ›being‹ in its particularity, and which according to Aristotle, ›alone exists‹, beyond the ideal or abstract existence of genera.«

Lévinas' dwelling on »uniqueness« can be read as an interpretation of the idea that binds human beings to a particular form, a particular group that they must stay true to. Any aberration is bound to tease the senses into unease, evoking emotional reactions, and/or ostracization.

Martha Nussbaum in her work, »Hiding from Humanity« provides a brief understanding of how the emotions of shame and disgust »concern the borders of the body«, and arbitrarily require uniformity. As Karl Rosenkranz writes, »in the concept of the human, there is no ugliness. This concept, as the concept of reason and freedom, demands its realization in exterior appearance through the regularity of form«, therefore the irregularity/non-uniformity can be said to contribute to ugliness. The ideas around ugliness, form, and shame have been in discussion for a long time, and it is because of their resonances with Abe's text, I have included them here in the text so as to better clarify the ideas presented in Abe's work.

Taking a cue from Nussbaum, a more trained lens at shame leads one to reflect on Morgan's ruminations. He writes that »one dimension of shame can be associated with the way others might look at us, and in this way, the judgment upon us comes from the outside.« This is interpretative of a certain set of ideals that must be adhered to by us by virtue of being humans. Shame, then becomes a reactionary emotion to »having failed to meet a standard or rule«.

The man with the bandaged face is aware of his predicament, and mentions the »fine show« that people put up in order to interact with him by »not looking square in the face but by being affable«. The false show of »affability« furthers the schism between the protagonist and society.

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The »cold and unaffable« room allows the protagonist to deliberate over »form«, leading the readers into a visual field wherein there is a universal value attached to »form« only agreements, no disagreements. The protagonist continues to lead the readers into the most intimate of his thoughts through his act of writing the notebook(s). He compares himself to monsters, and is finally led to believe that face is important to a man’s existence when his wife resists his sexual overtures. Until then, he had been convinced that »the face was a mere screen, an illusion of no importance«, but the failure to perform a sexual act underscores the »somatic limit of experience«, fuelling the »pain of inadequacy both in the eyes of others or before others, and in our own estimate«.

All societies mark some people as normal, while some are aberrant. Human beings are as it »deeply troubled about being human«, and the »crisis of self assertion against inassimilable otherness«, the threat to »self-preservation« lead us into the realm of what Foucault calls »the technologies of the self«.

Foucault subverts Weber’s original question about »what part of one’s self should one renounce to behave rationally«, and poses one of his own – »what must one know about oneself in order to be willing to renounce anything«, and he arrives at the answer through »the hermeneutics of the technologies of the self«. Foucault calls it »truth games« and the implication of the games means something which is not real?, further leading us to ponder over the question that the man without name asks- »is what you think to be in reality your real face, or is what you think to be your real face really a face?«.

The protagonist with the bandaged face has no inkling about what he has to be »ashamed about«, and can hardly comprehend that »the face is so important to a man’s existence«. The man with the bandaged face endures an odious identity crisis, and upon being asked by a young female student to look at a line drawing by Klee titled »False Face«, he is »overcome by an indescribable feeling of humiliation«.

He is aware of »being stared at from all sides, as if (I) were some interloper«, and the stares, the »pity« of his wife repulse him – eliciting »embarrassment«, and the visceral emotions of shame, and disgust, and longs to »put an end to (this) anguish, this game of blindman’s buff with no blindman«.

Foucault mentions in his essay, »all selves lead double lives as objects as well as subjects; to know the fullness of the self is to encounter the seeming poverty of the world from which the self has been sundered and out of whose plenitude the self has been fil-

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led«, and the protagonist is aware of this »algebraic equation«, where the »valuable is ephemeral«.

Foucault categorized four »technologies«, viz:

- technologies of production— which is evident in the novel through the manipulation of the mask by the protagonist. The protagonist’s rendezvous with the mask allows him to »produce« different identities of himself, he is at the liberty to be what he is not, or in fact, embrace his uninhibited self.
- technologies of sign systems—how the mask and the notebooks in the novel function as signs and symbols of the deepest desires of the protagonist, where he desires to conform to a certain standard of aesthetics.
- technologies of power— which is made evident through the powerplay between the couple; the protagonist and his wife, as well as the doctor who gives the protagonist his new mask. This is also a wider metaphor for the politics of aesthetics, and how looking and being a certain way commands more respectability than being a lack.
- technologies of the self— this implies the transformative operations on bodies, thoughts, and souls. The protagonist and his attempts to embrace an alternative face, a mask that is »an artificial organ made of plastic« so that he can win his wife’s affection ends up revealing his dark side. In his desire to become cosmetically appealing, he failed to realise that the beauty industry cannot enhance the beauty of his soul or thought. Rather, the beauty industry functions quite incidentally, aiming to conform to an ordered sense of aesthetics.

The protagonist though agonized because of his bandaged face, knows that his self-fashioning by putting on a mask is »apparently the expression of an extremely metaphysical aspiration to give oneself a kind of a transcendental disguise, for the mask is not simply something complementary..............no matter how many face I have, there is no changing the fact that I am me«.

It is interesting to remark that he embarks upon the journey of acquiring new face/mask by first purchasing a prosthetic finger, a well-meaning act of regaining phallic power in society, for he wishes to don the mask for the sake of seducing his wife.

The protagonist’s mask »simulates real skin, at least outwardly«, and begins to take a life of its own. In a zest to win back the affections of his wife, a split occurs between his bandaged face and the mask. With the mask on, he is at the liberty of being a »lecher«, to perform »mental acts of masturbation« for it is the mask and not him acting on impulse. This self-estrangement bears repercussions but at the cost of the protagonist’s self-knowledge.

The act of writing in the notebooks provides an introspection to the protagonist, and in the moments of catharticulation (a term that I propose by blending catharsis, the Greek word for the purification or purgation of emotions, and articulation), he con-

fesses to his erotic longing for his wife, which again borders on the violent rape, and »disgust« him, allowing »worms of shame to wriggle out of all the pores of (my) body«, for it is peculiar to shame that »shame can generate violence, which in turn can produce shame and then more violence, without end«.21

The unsettled boundaries between the face and the mask further blur the notions of reality, and we foray into the realm of Baudrillardian simulacrum. According to Baudrillard, reality itself has begun to imitate the model, which »now precedes and determines the real world. No longer a question of imitation, duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real.«22

Baudrillard cautions against the corrosion of reality or the image through representation, and the only way to restore the veracity of reality is via »critique or effective action to access the hidden fact of the real«- this knowledge of the self is a vista made available to the protagonist who realises that his wife’s face is a »mask« too.

**Losing Face(s)**

Order thus, precedes existence. Our existence is coded into a system of comprehensibility that allows us to impart meaning so as to impart meaning to the world around us. To understand that there is any meaning at all also pronounces the notion that this meaning generation is a human-made activity. The ability of humans to scribe boundaries and draw lines is a way of asserting differences, thereby creating and maintaining order.

The protagonist scientist by the end of the novel is in the Greek state of »paraskeuazo« (to get prepared), »not prepared for another reality but access to the reality of the world«.23

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