

PERFORMING EXISTENTIAL CONCERNS: BODY, SILENCE AND MEANING IN THEATRE

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Abstract: Existential concerns are closely connected with human life. Questions of identity, freedom, loneliness, anxiety, death and the search for meaning often appear in literature and theatre. These concerns are not expressed only through dialogue. In theatre, they can also be shown through the actor's body, movement, silence, voice and use of space. This paper looks at existential concerns as a part of theatrical performance. It discusses Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* [1] and Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* [2]. The paper focuses on the body, silence, waiting, identity and the search for meaning. In *Waiting for Godot*, waiting and repeated actions create a feeling of uncertainty and lack of purpose [1]. In *Hayavadana*, the relationship between the head and the body raises questions about identity and completeness [2]. The paper argues that theatre does not only talk about existential concerns. It makes them visible through performance. The actor's body becomes an important medium through which these concerns reach the audience.

Keywords: Existential concerns, Theatre, Performing body, Silence, Identity, Meaning.

I. INTRODUCTION

Theatre is a live and physical art form. It brings actors and audiences together in a shared space. The actor's body is an important part of this experience. An actor can communicate through speech, but also through movement, gesture, silence and stillness.

Theatre has often dealt with questions related to human existence. These include questions of identity, freedom, loneliness, anxiety, death and meaning. Such questions are also important to existential philosophy [3]. Thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus have discussed different aspects of human existence. However, a play does not have to be called an "existentialist play" to deal with existential concerns.

This paper uses the term existential concerns instead of treating existentialism as a fixed category. A play may deal with questions of identity or meaning without directly following existentialist philosophy. The main concern here is how these questions are presented through performance.

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is one important example. The play presents two characters, Vladimir and

Estragon, who wait for Godot [4]. They do not know when he will come. Their waiting continues, and the same actions are repeated. The play raises questions about time, purpose, uncertainty and meaning.

Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* presents a different kind of existential concern. The play deals strongly with identity and completeness. The exchange of heads between Devadatta and Kapila creates a conflict between the body and the mind. The question of who a person really is becomes a central issue.

Both plays show that existential concerns can become physical on stage. They can be seen in the body, movement, silence, space and actions of the performers.

II. EXISTENTIAL CONCERNS IN THEATRE

Existential concerns are related to basic questions of human life. Who am I? What is the meaning of my life? Am I free to choose? What happens when I am alone? How do I face uncertainty and death? [3]

Theatre can present these questions in a direct and physical way. The actor stands before the audience. The audience sees the actor's body and listens to the actor's voice. A character's state of mind can therefore be shown through physical action.

For example, loneliness can be shown by placing a character alone on stage. A character can stand far away from the others. The actor may avoid eye contact. Silence can also create a feeling of isolation. Anxiety can be shown through repeated movement, nervous gestures or changes in voice. A character who cannot make a decision may remain still for a long time. Thus, the body can communicate an inner condition [5]

This is why performance is important in the study of existential concerns. A written text tells us what a character says. Performance also shows what the character does.

In *Waiting for Godot*, this difference is clear. Vladimir and Estragon talk a lot. Yet their actions remain limited. They wait. They sit. They stand. They think about leaving. Then they continue waiting. Their repeated actions create a feeling of being trapped [6]

The meaning of the play therefore comes not only from its words. It also comes from the physical actions of the actors.

The body becomes part of the meaning. In Hayavadana, the body becomes even more important. The question of identity is connected with the physical body. The exchange of heads between Devadatta and Kapila creates a direct conflict between body and identity. The audience can see this conflict through the performers. [2]

Theatre thus gives physical form to abstract questions. Identity, loneliness and uncertainty become visible through the actor.

III. THE PERFORMING BODY AND IDENTITY

The body is central to theatre. Every performance uses the body in some way. Actors walk, stand, sit, speak, look and respond [7]. Even when an actor is silent, the body remains present. The performing body can therefore express existential concerns. Hayavadana is a useful example. Devadatta and Kapila are very different in body and personality. Devadatta is associated with the intellectual world, while Kapila is associated with physical strength. When their heads are exchanged, the difference between body and identity becomes difficult to understand.

The question becomes simple but deep: What makes a person who they are?

Is identity connected with the head? Is it connected with the body? Is it connected with memory? Or is it connected with social recognition? The play does not give a simple answer. Instead, it presents the problem through the bodies of the characters. This is one of the strengths of theatre. A philosophical question can become a physical event.

The character of Hayavadana also raises the question of completeness. He has a horse's head and a human body. He wants to become complete. His body itself shows that he is caught between two identities. His transformation is also important from a performance point of view. The audience does not only hear about his problem. It sees the problem through the character's physical appearance and actions.

The performing body can therefore become a site of conflict. It can show the difference between how a person sees themselves and how others see them.

This idea can also be connected with Indian performance traditions. Indian theatre gives importance to the actor's body, gesture and movement. Angika abhinaya, for example, uses the body as a means of expression. Through the body, an actor can communicate emotions, relationships and situations. [7]

The body is therefore not simply a tool for movement. It can carry meaning.

IV. SILENCE, WAITING AND REPETITION

Silence is another important part of existential performance. Silence does not mean that nothing is happening. A silent actor is still present before the audience. The audience watches the body and tries to understand the reason behind the silence.

Waiting for Godot makes strong use of silence and pauses. Vladimir and Estragon often stop, wait and repeat their actions. Their conversations do not lead to a clear solution. Waiting becomes the central physical action of the play. The two characters wait for Godot, but Godot does not appear. They continue to wait. Their situation does not change in any clear way. This creates an important existential question: What is the purpose of waiting? The play does not provide a final answer. The audience is left with the question.

Repetition also plays an important role. The characters repeat words and actions. They return to the same situation. This creates a sense of routine. The body seems to move, but the situation does not move forward. This creates a strong theatrical image of human uncertainty. A person may continue living, working and performing daily actions without knowing where those actions are leading.

Silence makes this experience stronger. A pause can make the audience uncomfortable. It can create expectation. It can also make the audience think about what is not being said. In this way, silence becomes a form of communication. The stage space also contributes to this experience. In Waiting for Godot, the simple setting leaves the characters in a limited space. The tree becomes one of the few visible elements on stage. The characters appear to have very few possibilities. Space therefore becomes connected with their condition.

V. ABSURDITY AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

Absurdity is often connected with Beckett's theatre. In Waiting for Godot, the characters continue to wait even though they have little information about Godot. Their conversations move between serious and comic moments. Their actions are often repeated.

The situation can appear strange and meaningless. However, the play does not simply say that life has no meaning. Instead, it places the characters in a situation where they must continue without certainty. This is important because human beings often look for meaning even when there is no clear answer. Vladimir and Estragon continue talking. They continue waiting. They continue meeting each other. Their relationship itself becomes a reason to continue. The search for meaning can therefore

exist even in an uncertain world. Hayavadana also presents a search for completeness. Hayavadana wants to become complete. Devadatta and Kapila also face problems because their identities become mixed.

The characters search for a stable sense of self. But the play makes this difficult. Both plays therefore present characters who are trying to understand their condition. Their questions are different, but both involve the problem of human existence.

VI. DISCUSSION

The two plays show different ways of presenting existential concerns. In *Waiting for Godot*, the main concerns appear through waiting, repetition, silence and limited movement. The body shows the condition of the characters. They are present, but they seem unable to change their situation. In *Hayavadana*, existential concerns appear through identity, the body and transformation. The relationship between the head and body creates a direct question about the nature of the self.

The comparison shows that existential concerns do not have one fixed theatrical form. They can be performed through silence. They can be performed through movement. They can be performed through stillness. They can be performed through masks and costumes. They can also be performed through the relationship between bodies in space. This approach changes the way existential concerns can be studied. Instead of asking only, "What existential idea is present in the play?", we can also ask, "How is this idea performed?" This second question brings the actor and the stage into the centre of the analysis. For example, loneliness may be written in a dialogue. But the same loneliness may become stronger when an actor stands alone in a large empty space. Similarly, anxiety may be mentioned in words. But an actor's tense body, repeated movement or silence may communicate it more directly. Existential concerns are therefore not only ideas. They can become physical experiences on stage.

VII. CONCLUSION

Existential concerns have an important place in theatre because theatre deals directly with human beings, their bodies and their relationships. *Waiting for Godot* and *Hayavadana* show two different ways of presenting such concerns. Beckett uses waiting, silence, repetition and limited movement. Karnad uses identity, transformation and the relationship between body and head. The study of these plays shows that existential concerns can be understood through performance. The actor's body can communicate uncertainty. Silence can communicate loneliness. Repetition can create a feeling of being trapped. Space can show separation. Transformation can question identity.

Therefore, theatre does not only speak about human existence. It performs human existence. A performance allows the audience to see and experience questions that may otherwise remain abstract. This makes the study of the performing body important in understanding existential concerns in theatre.

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