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Dramaturgy: Understanding drama and theatre through syntax and semiotics in pedagogical practice with DiE and TiE

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Abstract

This paper studies Dramaturgy and Semiotics and their understanding in pedagogy. To comprehend how signs create meaning in theatre, the need to teach it in a classroom setup is requisite for the students. Although actual performances cannot be conducted in a pedagogical environment, Drama in Education (DiE) and Theatre in Education (TiE) come into play for understanding the semiotics of Dramaturgy. Theatrical semiotics as exhibited through signs is necessary to understand the play, and Syntax, the understanding of the smallest unit in theatre is necessary to gain overall knowledge of the performance. The syntax of the theatre is not just the smallest unit of word but also scenes, gestures, sounds, etc, which is the identification of the smallest building block of theatrical meaning. Understanding semiotics and syntax helps to understand the Dramaturgy in a classroom setup.

Keywords: Semiotics, theatre, dramaturgy, pedagogy, syntax

Introduction

Drama is the written text of a Theatrical performance; in a way, it is the script, “[it] tells a story by representing interpersonal relationships through the medium of dialogue – that is, by means of representing people talking to one another.” (Svendsen) In a literature classroom in India, drama is studied as a text, rather than as an experience of performance. Drama is read and explained like novels in the classroom, and students understand only the plot, themes, and characters. Apart from it, there are many things to look into in a play, “Drama is not, then, completely synonymous with the idea of a play: plays have many extra-dramatic elements, features that involve forms of representation other than dialogue between characters.” (Svendsen) There is a lack of strategies to incorporate drama and play in pedagogy. To fully understand the drama or theatrical piece, there is a need for new strategies in the pedagogy. Theatre should be approached as a whole, as literature, and also as stage practice. (Toro 36). This paper explores syntax and semiotics to study and understand dramaturgy in theatre. It explores DiE and TiE strategies related to understanding the semiotics of Dramaturgy within a classroom setting in India. It examines the process of meaning-making and how the interpretation of meaning varies among audiences due to cultural differences. The study employs demonstration of hands-on activities and their usefulness in understanding dramaturgy in a classroom.

Dramaturgy in Theatre

Dramaturgy as a concept and term first appeared in the writing of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in the journal Hamburg Dramaturgy, which speaks about methods of acting, the construction of plays and many other elements of theatre. The word Dramaturgy comes from the Greek word dramaturgia, which means ‘a dramatic composition’ or ‘action of a play’. Dramaturgy is the practice of understanding the structure, context, characters, language, and themes of a play. Bertolt Brecht developed that in addition to acting, dialogue, and narrative, dramaturgy includes other elements like lighting, direction, design, and costumes, which collectively contribute to the meaning. According to Anne M. Hamilton and Walter Byongsok Chon, “[d]ramaturgy is a multidimensional process. [It] is the underpinning to the why and how and to what end.

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It is filtering a text through one's own experience, processing it, and giving a response." (5) Dramaturgy is the key to link drama as a text and theatre as performance. Dramaturgy consists of a dramaturg,

[Who] serves as a bridge between the text and the creative team, between the team members, and between the production and the audience/community. The dramaturg helps the script come to life on stage and guide the audience toward a full experience of the production. (Hamilton and Chon 49). Traditional dramaturgy is text based which presents the playwright as central, the text precedes the performance. The plot is usually linear, consisting of a beginning, middle and an end, with passive spectatorship. Whereas, Modern dramaturgy is performance or process-oriented. It consists of a dramaturg who collectively creates meaning, and the text becomes secondary. The plot is non-linear, fragmented, and sometimes anti-narrative. It has active spectatorship.

Dramaturgy comprises the study of how everything is presented on the stage during a theatre performance. However, studying everything on the stage in theatre comes under teatrology and these study of every component on the stage means studying every sign vehicle which leads to the study of semiotics. To understand dramaturgy in terms of semiotics, it is important to understand semiotics in simpler terms.

Semiotics in Theatre

Semiotics, simply defined, is the study of signs. The study of "those objects by which humans communicate meaning: words, images, behaviour, arrangements of many kinds, in which a meaning or idea is relayed by a corresponding manifestation we can perceive." (Fortier 14) Semiotics was introduced by French Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who stated that a sign comprises a signifier (content) and a signified (meaning). However, his theory was based primarily on language. At the same time, Charles Sanders Peirce, an American philosopher, introduced semiotics with a sign comprising of Representamen, Interpretant, and Object. Saussure believed meaning exists within the larger system, but Peirce believed that there is meaning only if there is someone to interpret it, there is no meaning without interpretation. Later, Barthes contributes to Semiotics and he "is important for his applications of semiotic analysis to specific cultural activities and for his application of semiotic analysis to nonverbal as well as verbal signification." (Fortier 16)

Further moving to theatre semiotics, according to Mark Fortier, "Theatre semiotics is predominantly the study of signs that humans put on stage for others to interpret." (14) Semiotics in theatre comprises the study of lighting, actors, stage, and all the elements present on the stage during a performance in the theatre to understand the meaning. According to Umberto Eco, theatre semiosis states "that the way signs function in theatre constitutes what he calls the square of semiosis, that is, the displacement of the theatre sign considered as real (object), then transformed into a sign so that it may refer to another object." (Toro 64), the representation of sign through objects on the stage can imply to different meanings based on the context and the stage setup and also a sign can have multiple meanings and interpretations. Semiotics of Dramaturgy is the study of how meaning is created in theatre using different signs or codes – spoken words, gestures, costumes, space, sound, and

everything. Signs in theatre are layered: they represent, imitate, and sometimes symbolise – creating a complex system of meaning. As Nöth states, theatrical signs are polysemous, consisting of multiple meanings. (364) there cannot be only single meaning to one sign, a single sign can have multiple meaning,

Theatre sign is that it cannot be reduced to a single sign, and even less to minimal units of signification. Theatre is a place of privilege for the sign, because, in the stage space, everything is either an artificial or a natural sign. Everything is seen or perceived as a sign by the spectator; the plurality and polyphony of signs in theatre is immense. From the moment the actor begins to move about the stage, or when the curtain goes up, the audience is in front of both a reality signified by means of the sign and a system of signs, and thus it is difficult to speak of natural signs. The theatre sign, then, immediately shows itself to be an artifice. (Toro 68-69). Carlson presents Barthes' response to a journal *Tel Quel* on semiotic definition of theatre, "Barthes characterized the theatre as "a kind of cybernetic machine" which, as soon as the curtain rises, sends out a variety of simultaneous messages (from setting, costumes, and lighting, as well as from the positions, words, and gestures of the actors), some of which remain constant for extended periods (such as the setting), while others continuously change (such as words and gestures)." (xii) According to theatre semioticians, Elaine Aston and George Savona, "The usefulness of the [semiotic theory] lies in its potential to make us aware of how drama and theatre are made" (qtd in Fortier 14)

It is important to have semiotic awareness in understanding the classical as well as modern theatre forms. Semiotics is important to understand the author's meaning as well as moving beyond that, and to interpret audiences' understanding of meaning, and also to know how meaning is produced. Understanding meaning of a sign is not enough, it is important to arrange this signs in a format which makes complete sense of a storyline or plot. To understand it, it is important to understand syntax.

Syntax in Theatre

Syntax is the study of the arrangement of words or phrases to create meaning. The structure of grammar in language creates meaning. In theatre, with words, the action is also required; it becomes performative. To understand theatre, it is best to understand speech act theory, which posits that saying something is also DOing something. (Segre and Meddemmen 45) Theatre creates meaning by blending words and movement. The verbal and visual aspects cannot be separated. In theatre, breaking performances into small units of meaning, like scenes, gestures, and sounds. This is the syntax of theatre, called segmentation, through which the identification of the smallest building blocks of theatrical meaning is carried out. While on stage, in speaking the dialogue, the actor also uses their body to point to their relations within the on-stage dramatic world, as well as their actions within it. Cesare Segre adds to this that, apart from the speech act theory, it is important to link sign theory and the audience's role in interpreting meaning. (47) Segre quotes Mounin to explain theatre semiotics beyond language, that the study is "beyond the linguistic nature of the dialogues, and thus beyond speech acts as well" (47), it isn't only about dialogue but in addition everything else which according to Segre is "performative Hypersentence"

(47) which states that each line spoken by an actor has an invisible preface that is not spoken aloud but is understood by both the audience and the actors. It is an underlying spoken line creating the illusion of realism while being understood as fiction. Syntax in stage means the ordering of dialogue, movements, and many more. It is important to examine the structure to comprehend its meaning. Understanding Dramaturgy through semiotics means understanding the signs which explains the structure, characters, settings, etc of a Drama or theatrical play.

Bridging drama and theatrical play through understanding dramaturgy with semiotics in pedagogical practice

Understanding Semiotics of Dramaturgy in Classroom through Drama in Education (DiE) and Theatre in Education (TiE)

Drama in Education (DiE) and Theatre in Education (TiE) are not new concepts but represent innovative educational practices that provide students with a safe space, i.e., a classroom, to understand drama and theatre. The students can get comfortable and understand the concepts by breaking the concepts into simpler forms. DiE is process-focused, where students can participate in the scenario, act themselves, take on roles, and explore ideas. The teacher and students are equally involved in the process of understanding the drama. It focuses on educational understanding, rather than perfect performance or perfection. Hence, the teacher can help them make choices about how to act and how to create the stage, so that they can themselves make the signs. They can be the dramaturg to set everything up and create the meaning they want. They can act out and create their own meaning as performers. In DiE, students can take up the role of dramaturg and can be part of the semiotics of production, which includes encoding meaning. Being a dramaturg, students can empower themselves for an action. DiE helps them to become a dramaturg, it helps them to understand themselves while scripting and performing, they would get the difference and proper understanding on how smallest of things affect the performance in meaning-making or altering the meaning. It would help students to make their own interpretation while watching a performance and the difference in how they would perform to show the required emotions or message. They can get a result of how meaning varies in the audience's perception, and their cultural understanding and context. It focuses on the educational process, not performance. It helps students to think about how meaning is made, the meaning-making process. Moreover, TiE includes professional actors or a theatre company performing in educational setups. Though the performance is not literature-based, it is usually on social issues performed for social awareness, but it is child-centred and includes interactive sessions. This includes post-performance discussion which can help the students to ask questions about things which they have not understood. This session can give the students the opportunity to present their individual understanding and to interpret the meaning from their understanding of signs. It would present a scenario where each one can have a different understanding of the signs based on their cultural understanding. A discussion at the end can convey how different factors influence the meaning making process and how all of it is important. Elam Keir quoted Jiri Veltrusky, who states, "All that is on

the stage is a sign" (qtd in Fortier 17) In TiE, students will deal with Semiotics of reception, decoding meaning. Though TiE does not bring literature related studies for the students but it brings plays on social awareness, and other activities, which can be helpful for the students to understand its semiotics through watching the play.

The goal of studying semiotics is to understand the meaning behind both visuals and words. Therefore, it is advised to use visuals so that the students can understand the characters, mis-en-scene by bringing the things and the events to life. Students can find out the difference that the visuals create in meaning making in addition to the words. The understanding of how everything creates meaning, like the props, the stage, and everything, is important, "[t]he purpose of theatre is to put the audience in a better position to understand the world around them, a world which ... is social and changeable." (Fortier 20) DiE and TiE can be implemented in schools to enhance the understanding of the semiotics in spoken words, body gestures, actors' external aspects (mimetic and gestural), stage/setting, and Unarticulated sound.

Advantages of teaching and understanding Semiotics in Pedagogy

Everything in this universe has meaning confined to it, and it is important for a person to understand the meanings. It is easier to understand denotative meaning, but to understand a connotative meaning, one needs to have a deeper thinking process. Understanding Semiotics and starting to teach it in classrooms will help students boost their cognitive thinking process. It will not only provide them with things to see at a surface level, but also offer a deeper understanding of connotative meanings. It enhances the students' critical thinking.

Difficulties in understanding the semiotics of Dramaturgy in Classroom

Understanding the Semiotics of dramaturgy requires access to the setup that dramaturgy consists of, i.e., the stage, lighting, props, and everything on a theatrical stage. It is not possible to bring that to the classroom, although an occasional visit to watch a theatre play would be a decent idea, but that is not possible with every institution; hence, an alternative way is required to solve the problem. To get hands-on experience and understand the semiotics of Dramaturgy, teachers can use the approach of Drama in Education (DiE) and Theatre in Education (TiE). The main difficulty would be the lack of trained faculty in dramaturgy with limited resources. In India, teaching and learning process is quite traditional, students learn what they are taught in the classroom. There are no contemporary modifications of the ways and methods. In today's world, numerous developments have occurred to facilitate drama instruction in the classroom, including the introduction of online theatre and performance-based classes.

Assessing and Comparing Semiotics of Dramaturgy in Pedagogy and Theatre

There is no proper approach taken on how to study drama in a classroom. Drama is not for reading but for performance and watching the performances. This comparison and assessment allow the students to grasp semiotics in both words and visuals. It helps to clarify the alternative meanings formed in each case. Drama is rather more a

performing art than a reading material. While reading drama, students' imaginations become more active, and with visual performance of the drama they can learn about the visual semiotics while watching a performance. Studying both aspects in terms of semiotics will benefit the students as Aston and Savona states "The usefulness of the approach lies in its potential to make us more aware of how drama and theatre are made" (qtd in Fortier 14) Apart from that, According to Alter, semiotic approaches to theatre have to deal with "two categories of Signs," which the author calls verbal signs and staging sign. Theatre studies have often neglected one of these two semiotic dimensions and have thus become the victim of one of two "fallacies": "The literary fallacy leads to the assimilation of theatre to the text only and results in its reduction to the status of a particular genre of literature. The performing fallacy, increasingly popular, leads to the assimilation of theatre to the performance only, and results in its reduction to the status of a particular genre of show." The attempt to overcome such fallacies in a holistic approach to the medium is perhaps one of the most general characteristics of semiotic approaches to theatre. (qtd in Nöth 362)

In addition to these practices, digital theatre can also be shown in classrooms, and films can be studied to understand semiotics, since the semiotics of theatre is closely related to the semiotics of films. (qtd in Nöth 362)

Conclusion

The study indicates the necessity of understanding the semiotics of Dramaturgy in Pedagogy and the benefits it provides to the cognitive learning and development of the students. The objective in a pedagogy should be to increase proficiency and to create cognitive development and these learning process would provide the area for that development. Semiotics gives signs to understand the meaning and understanding meaning is essential to enhance overall development. Introducing DiE and TiE in Indian classroom to study Drama would be very much helpful for students. Though many advanced technological invention has been introduced but DiE and TiE would provide them with hands-on experience and learning.

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