

ISSN 2063-5346



# SPEECH STAB AND LANGUAGE LARCENY IN KASPAR BY PETER HANDKE

Sushila<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Kaushal Kishore Sharma<sup>2</sup>

---

**Article History: Received: 10.05.2023****Revised: 29.05.2023****Accepted: 09.06.2023**

---

**Abstract**

Described as “the play of the decade” by Max Frisch *Kaspar* is an unconventional drama by Peter Handke. Based on the real story of an enigmatic figure Kasper Hauser the play deals with several themes of speech, language, society, and off course the impact of language on individual and the society. Flouting the traditional rules of theatre and escaping the conventions of Anti-Theatre and Theatre of the absurd, Handke’s *Kaspar* establishes the role of language in imprisoning us rather than liberating. The paper is a genuine effort to discover that how the almost speechless, guiltless protagonist is tortured and killed by society’s attempts to impose on him its language and its own rational values.

**Key Words:** Kaspar, Peter handke, Language, Speech, Drama, Anti-Theatre.

---

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Amity University Rajasthan, India<sup>2</sup>Asst. Prof., Amity University Rajasthan, India**DOI:10.48047/ecb/2023.12.9.62**

## Introduction

The play *Kaspar* written by Peter Handke is loosely based on the life of a German youth Kaspar Hauser who is believed to have grown in complete isolation in a darkened prison and had died from a stab wound in his chest. The claims, counterclaims and stories about the life and death of Kaspar Hauser had stirred a controversy. Though there have been numerous theories supporting and refuting the existence and death of Kaspar Hauser yet all the theories either clearly or obscurely are in unison that he died as soon as he was out from the confinement and was asked to disclose himself. He was buried in the city cemetery of Ansbach, Germany. The words on his monument are "Here lies a mysterious one who was killed in a mysterious manner."

The play *Kaspar* by Handke is all about speech, language, speechlessness, and the capacity of language to torture. The lines from the book's back page tell us an interesting point about the play. Accordingly, "As completely unrealistic as *Kaspar* is, the plays substance--the programming of a theatre creature by entirely theatrical means, and his eventual discovery of the artificiality of who he is and what he has been taught--could hardly be a more pertinent metaphor for our time, particularly for the young."

The unconventional play *Kaspar* does not follow traditional concepts of conventional drama as it is neither representational nor descriptive. The vital components of a play like plot, coherence, characters, connecting phrases tension, subtle dialogues and meanings inherent in the words are not to be found in the play. The audience then must not compare stage reality with the reality he or she knows. Events represent themselves-no more, no less. Theatre, for Handke, has neither object nor subject. Concepts, values, functional systems of signification, verifiable contents are not required and so remain non-

existent in *Kaspar*. Words alone are of import; they alone create reality.

Ronald Hayman in his book *Theatre and Anti-Theatre*, comments "What is unique for Peter Handke as a dramatist is that he is not attempting to dramatize the story told in Hauser's autobiography, but to analyse a comparable loss of linguistic innocence, and, as in Ionesco's early plays, the underlying assumption is that language can be an instrument of oppression and depersonalisation." Handke remarks that Kaspar "shows how someone can be led into speaking

by speaking."

Likewise, Jeanette R. Malkin in *Verbal Violence in Contemporary Drama From Handke to Shepard* opine Handke's view, or rather critique, of language, and in a voice – controlled, aphoristic, sensitive to the texture and cadence of a well-formed sentence – which is an echo of Handke's own. *Kaspar* which is all about language and the ways in which the form of language shapes, shades, influences, and distorts the lives of man. The "story" of the play is that of one speechless man – Kaspar – and how he is created and destroyed through his forced acquisition of language. "The play could also be called speech torture," Handke writes, thereby making explicit his view of the relationship between language and man: a relationship of torture, pain, and coercion. The play shows, Handke explains, "how someone can be made to speak through speaking." This is, then, the central "action" of the play: Speech (represented by three disembodied voices, Einsager, i.e., Prompters) creating the Speechless (Kaspar) in its own image. These are also the two main "characters" of the play: Kaspar, a clown figure, a human abstraction whom Handke ironically calls "the HERO"; and Speech, voices heard over loudspeakers, voices to which Kaspar reacts and with which he is in conflict, voices which teach and finally coerce

Kaspar into becoming like speech itself: well-formed and orderly.

The prologue of *Kaspar* begins with these words:

The play *Kaspar* does not show how IT REALLY IS or REALLY

WAS with Kaspar Hauser. It shows what is POSSIBLE with

someone. It shows how someone can be made to speak through

speaking. The play could also be called speech torture }

Gunther Sergooris suggests that in *Kaspar* language functions as a negation of pluralism, that it is a play about the negative possibilities of language development and its systematic adaptation to whatever point of view dominates. Speech, then, is not only omnipotent, but becomes a fetish with, perhaps, spiritual and sexual impact." He further remarks on the significance of the rudimentary stages of *Kaspar's* comprehension. Certainly, climbing the ladder of learning (as he did during the play) was a difficult, confusing, and contradictory task. At the play's conclusion the spectators are faced with an utterly desolate and disconsolate being who has, as a result of the "educational" process, reached the depths of pain."

### Conclusion

Peter Handke's *Kaspar* is about language and its ability to inflict pain. The spectators

of the play listen differently and reflect on how language is forced upon them by a society where conformism is the norm and received speech an almost tyrannical exploitation of the individual. The play subtly suggests that individuals are bound to negate themselves under the pressure of the societies that they live in. "What *Kaspar* experiences on stage can happen daily: The need or desire to conform, to observe and imitate someone else's words and actions, to assert oneself and at the same time, negate oneself. M. Roloff views the basic theme of *Kaspar* as the inherent authoritative power of language itself to shape, twist, expand, delimit, and mediate human experience, the ultimate tragicomic story of socialization and civilization.

### Works Cited

- Handke, Peter . *Kaspar*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.2018
- Hayman, Ronald. Theatre and Anti-theatre, Martin Secker & Warburg Ltd, 1979
- Heintz, Gunter. Peter Handke, R Oldenbourg Publisher, 1974
- Hamilton, r. james "Handke's *Kaspar*, *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, Wittgenstein's Tractates, and the successful representation of alienation," Spring 1995.
- M. Read, "Peter Handke's *Kaspar* and the power of negative thinking," *Oxford Journal*, 1993.