



Oratory as Political Theatre: Performative Dynamics in Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's March 7, 1971 Speech

Sumon Sikder¹, Mohammad Rahmatullah², Mohammad Jashim Uddin³

¹Student, B.A. Hons. In English Language and Literature, Northern University Bangladesh, Bangladesh

Email: sikders620@gmail.com

²Senior Lecturer, Dept. Of English Language and Literature, Northern University Bangladesh, Bangladesh

Email: likhon66193@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1395-8640>

³Associate Professor & Head, Dept. Of English Language and Literature, Northern University Bangladesh, Bangladesh

Email: jashimuddinresearch@gmail.com

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Abstract— This paper examines the performative dimensions of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's seminal March 7, 1971, speech through the lenses of Erving Goffman's dramaturgical analysis and Richard Schechner's performance theory. By deconstructing the speech's gestural rhetoric, vocal dynamics, and audience engagement, this study elucidates how Bangabandhu's oratory transcended mere political discourse to become a potent act of political theatre. The analysis reveals that through strategic use of gestures, pauses, and direct interaction with the audience, Bangabandhu not only conveyed his message with compelling clarity but also fostered a robust communal identity and mobilized collective action. The symbolic and ritualistic elements embedded within the speech further underscore its transformative impact on the Bengali liberation movement. This scholarly exploration offers valuable insights into the intersection of performance and politics, highlighting the enduring relevance of performative strategies in contemporary political oratory. The practical implications of this study extend to enhancing the efficacy of political communication and leadership in mobilizing societal change.

Keywords— *Performative Rhetoric, Political Theatre, Dramaturgical Analysis, Audience Engagement, Liberation Movement*



I. INTRODUCTION

The March 7, 1971 speech by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman stands as a seminal moment in the history of Bangladesh. Delivered at the Racecourse Ground in Dhaka, this address galvanized the Bengali population, setting the stage for the Liberation War that ultimately led to the independence of Bangladesh. His speech was not merely a political declaration; it was a masterful blend of rhetoric, emotion, and performance that transcended traditional political discourse, transforming it into an act of political theatre. The speech's enduring impact underscores its

significance as a pivotal catalyst in the Bengali liberation movement.

Performance theory offers a compelling framework for analyzing such transformative oratory. Rooted in the disciplines of sociology and theatre studies, performance theory provides tools to deconstruct the elements of performance embedded within political speeches. Erving Goffman's dramaturgical analysis, as articulated in "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life," conceptualizes social interactions as theatrical performances, where individuals manage their public personas to influence audience perception (Goffman 22). This perspective is

instrumental in examining the strategic use of gestures, pauses, and vocal modulation in his speech.

Complementing Goffman's insights, Richard Schechner's performance theory emphasizes the ritualistic and symbolic dimensions of performances. Schechner posits that performances are not only about conveying information but also about enacting behaviors that resonate on a deeper, often unconscious level with the audience. His notion of "restored behavior" — actions that are rehearsed and repeated in different contexts — is particularly relevant to political speeches, which often draw on cultural symbols and collective memories to evoke emotional responses (Schechner 31).

This paper applies Goffman's dramaturgical analysis and Schechner's performance theory to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's March 7, 1971 speech. By deconstructing the speech's gestural rhetoric, vocal dynamics, and audience engagement, this study elucidates how his speech transcended mere political discourse to become a potent act of political theatre. The analysis reveals that through strategic use of gestures, pauses, and direct interaction with the audience, he not only conveyed his message with compelling clarity but also fostered a robust communal identity and mobilized collective action. This scholarly exploration offers valuable insights into the intersection of performance and politics, highlighting the enduring relevance of performative strategies in contemporary political speech.

II. DRAMATURGICAL ELEMENTS IN ORATORY

Goffman's dramaturgical analysis offers a robust framework for dissecting social interactions by likening them to theatrical performances. In his seminal work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman posits that individuals perform roles in everyday life, managing the impressions they convey to others (Goffman 1). This concept of dramaturgy is particularly applicable to political speeches, where the orator strategically crafts their public persona to influence and engage the audience.

Goffman's analysis hinges on the idea that social life is divided into front stage and back stage regions. The front stage is where the performance is given, and the individual presents an idealized version of themselves to the audience. In contrast, the back stage is where the performer can relax and step out of their character, preparing for the front stage performance (Goffman 22). This dichotomy is crucial for understanding how political figures like Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman manage their public personas during pivotal speeches.

In his March 7, 1971 speech, his public persona is meticulously crafted to exude authority, compassion, and resolve. His gestures, vocal modulation, and direct engagement with the audience all serve to reinforce this carefully curated image. The private preparation that precedes such a public performance involves rehearsing the speech, anticipating audience reactions, and strategically planning gestures and pauses. This meticulous preparation is evident in his delivery, which seamlessly integrates these elements to enhance the speech's impact.

Goffman's concept of impression management involves controlling the information that others receive about an individual to shape their perceptions. He employs several techniques of impression management in his speech. For instance, his use of rhetorical questions, such as "Do you, my brothers, have complete faith in me?" serves to involve the audience directly, creating a sense of shared purpose and unity (Rahman). This technique not only reinforces his connection with the audience but also bolsters his authority and credibility.

Goffman notes, "The performer who is to be dramaturgically prudent will have to adapt his performance to the information conditions under which it must be staged" (Goffman 142). Bangabandhu exemplifies this by adapting his speech to resonate with the audience's emotions and expectations. His references to historical struggles and shared sacrifices, such as "We gave blood in 1952, we won a mandate in 1954," evoke collective memories and foster a strong communal identity (Rahman).

Critics like Charles Edgley and Dennis Brissett have emphasized the importance of the dramaturgical perspective in understanding political performances. They argue that political leaders must carefully manage their public images to maintain legitimacy and influence (Edgley and Brissett 10). His speech is a testament to this, as he skillfully manages his public persona to inspire and mobilize his audience.

One notable example of front stage behavior in his speech is his use of broad, sweeping gestures to convey confidence and authority. As Goffman explains, gestures and body language are critical components of the front stage performance, enhancing the delivery of a speech and effectively conveying emotions to the audience (Goffman 160). His gestures, such as raising his hand and pointing to the crowd, are designed to project strength and decisiveness.

Additionally, his strategic use of pauses and vocal intonation exemplifies impression management. His pauses allow the audience to absorb his words, while variations in intonation emphasize critical points, creating a rhythm that engages listeners emotionally. Goffman's analysis underscores the importance of such techniques, stating that

both honest and dishonest performers must enliven their performances with appropriate expressions to maintain the audience's trust and attention (Goffman 44).

Richard Schechner's performance theory further illuminates Bangabandhu's techniques. Schechner highlights the importance of "restored behavior" in performances, where actions are rehearsed and repeated to create symbolic meaning (Schechner 31). Bangabandhu's references to past events and his call for unity can be seen as restored behaviors, reinforcing a shared cultural identity and collective memory among his audience.

Critics like Victor Turner have also noted the ritualistic aspects of political performances. Turner argues that such performances often incorporate symbolic acts that resonate deeply with audiences, fostering a sense of communal identity and solidarity (Turner 22). His speech, with its references to historical sacrifices and calls for collective action, exemplifies this ritualistic dimension.

III. GESTURAL RHETORIC: THE BODY IN PERFORMANCE

Gestures and body language are integral to political oratory, serving as powerful tools for enhancing the delivery and reception of a speech. Non-verbal communication can convey confidence, authority, and empathy, thereby augmenting the spoken words. According to Erving Goffman, gestures and body language play a vital role in communication, as they can "enhance the delivery of a speech and convey emotions effectively to the audience" (Goffman 160). In political speeches, these elements become even more crucial, as they help establish the speaker's credibility and rapport with the audience.

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's March 7, 1971 speech is a compelling example of how physical gestures can amplify a political message. Throughout his address, he frequently used broad, sweeping motions, raised his hand, and pointed to the crowd. These gestures were not merely random; they were meticulously crafted to project confidence and authority. When he declared, "You are the ones who brought about an Awami League victory so you could see a constitutional government restored," he accompanied his words with gestures that underscored his connection to the audience and his leadership role (Rahman).

His physical gestures were instrumental in projecting confidence and authority. By raising his hand and pointing to the crowd, he asserted his leadership and command over the situation. Goffman's concept of the front stage performance is evident here, as he presented an idealized version of himself, embodying the aspirations and emotions

of his audience. Richard Schechner's performance theory, which emphasizes the ritualistic and symbolic dimensions of performance, also applies. Schechner posits that performances often draw on cultural symbols and collective memories to evoke emotional responses (Schechner 31). His gestures, deeply rooted in the cultural context of the Bengali liberation struggle, resonated profoundly with his audience.

The strategic use of gestures in his speech had a significant impact on audience perception. By employing broad, emphatic movements, he not only captured the audience's attention but also conveyed a sense of urgency and importance. These gestures helped to reinforce his verbal messages, making them more memorable and impactful. Critics like Ray L. Birdwhistell have highlighted that non-verbal communication can often be more powerful than words, as it engages the audience on a visceral level (Birdwhistell 45). Bangabandhu's physical gestures created a dynamic interplay between spoken words and body language, enhancing the overall persuasive power of his speech.

Applying Goffman's dramaturgical analysis, Bangabandhu's gestures can be seen as part of his front stage performance, where he meticulously managed impressions to influence his audience. Goffman's idea that "both honest and dishonest performers must enliven their performances with appropriate expressions" underscores the importance of gestures in maintaining the audience's trust and attention (Goffman 44). His use of hand movements and broad gestures served to animate his performance, making his message more compelling.

Schechner's performance theory adds another layer of understanding to Bangabandhu's gestures. Schechner's concept of "restored behavior"—repeated actions that become symbolic—explains how his gestures evoked historical and cultural symbols, reinforcing the collective memory and identity of his audience (Schechner 31). These gestures were not spontaneous but were deeply embedded in the ritualistic nature of political performances, transforming the speech into a powerful act of political theatre.

Critics like Victor Turner have noted that such performances often incorporate symbolic acts that resonate deeply with audiences, fostering a sense of communal identity and solidarity (Turner 22). Bangabandhu's speech, with its rich gestural rhetoric, exemplifies this ritualistic dimension, mobilizing the audience through a shared cultural and emotional experience.

IV. VOCAL DYNAMICS AND EMOTIONAL RESONANCE

Vocal techniques are paramount in enhancing the rhetorical impact of a speech, transforming it from a mere delivery of words into a powerful act of communication. Effective use of pauses, intonation, and emphasis can create a rhythm that captivates the audience and underscores the speaker's key points. As Erving Goffman notes, the control of vocal expressions is a crucial element of impression management, allowing the speaker to guide the audience's perception and emotional response (Goffman 44). Similarly, Richard Schechner emphasizes that vocal dynamics are integral to the performative aspects of a speech, helping to evoke emotional resonance and engagement (Schechner 31).

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's March 7, 1971 speech masterfully employs vocal techniques to enhance its rhetorical impact. His strategic use of pauses allows the audience to absorb his words and reflect on their significance. For instance, when Bangabandhu states, "I have come before you today with a heavy heart," he pauses, giving weight to his words and allowing the audience to feel the gravity of the situation (Rahman). This pause creates a moment of silence that amplifies the emotional resonance of his message.

Intonation plays a crucial role in his speech, as he varies his pitch to emphasize critical points and convey his emotions. When he recounts the struggles and sacrifices of the Bengali people, his voice rises and falls, reflecting his passion and determination. This variation in intonation not only keeps the audience engaged but also reinforces the emotional content of his speech. As Goffman suggests, vocal dynamics are essential for maintaining the audience's attention and ensuring that the speaker's message is received with the intended impact (Goffman 44).

Emphasis is another key vocal technique used by Bangabandhu to highlight important points. By stressing certain words and phrases, he draws the audience's attention to his core messages. For example, when he declares, "The struggle this time is a struggle for emancipation! The struggle this time is a struggle for independence!" the repeated emphasis on "struggle" underscores the central theme of his speech and galvanizes the audience (Rahman).

The strategic use of pauses, intonation, and emphasis creates a rhythmic flow in his speech, enhancing its emotional engagement. This rhythm not only captures the audience's attention but also helps to convey the urgency and importance of his message. Richard Schechner's performance theory highlights the significance of rhythm in performance, noting that it can create a sense of unity and collective emotion among the audience (Schechner 31). His speech exemplifies this, as his vocal techniques foster a

shared emotional experience that strengthens the bond between the speaker and the audience.

Vocal dynamics are integral to the performative aspect of his speech, transforming it into a compelling act of political theatre. By using pauses, intonation, and emphasis, he not only communicates his message effectively but also engages the audience on an emotional level. This performative element is crucial for mobilizing the audience and fostering a sense of collective purpose.

Goffman's dramaturgical analysis provides valuable insights into how these vocal dynamics function within the broader context of impression management. According to Goffman, effective performers must skillfully manage their vocal expressions to maintain the audience's trust and attention (Goffman 44). Bangabandhu's adept use of vocal techniques ensures that his performance resonates with the audience, reinforcing his authority and credibility.

Schechner's performance theory further illuminates the role of vocal dynamics in political oratory. Schechner argues that vocal techniques can evoke ritualistic and symbolic meanings, creating a performative act that transcends mere communication (Schechner 31). In his speech, the use of vocal dynamics not only enhances the rhetorical impact but also imbues the speech with a deeper symbolic resonance, reflecting the collective aspirations and struggles of the Bengali people.

Critics like Kenneth Burke have also emphasized the importance of vocal dynamics in rhetoric, noting that the "music" of speech—its rhythm, intonation, and emphasis—can profoundly influence the audience's emotional response (Burke 56). His speech, with its masterful use of vocal techniques, exemplifies this principle, demonstrating how vocal dynamics can transform a speech into a powerful act of political performance.

V. AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNAL IDENTITY

Direct audience interaction is a pivotal element in political theatre, enhancing the speaker's ability to connect with the audience and foster a sense of communal identity. This interaction transforms a monologue into a dialogue, making the audience active participants rather than passive listeners. Erving Goffman emphasizes the importance of understanding audience responses, noting that effective performers must adapt their presentations to maintain engagement and credibility (Goffman 43). Richard Schechner extends this concept by highlighting the ritualistic aspects of performance, where audience interaction becomes a crucial component of the collective experience (Schechner 31).

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's March 7, 1971 speech exemplifies effective audience engagement through rhetorical questions, call-and-response, and eliciting crowd reactions. These techniques not only involve the audience directly but also serve to reinforce the speech's emotional and rhetorical impact.

His use of rhetorical questions is particularly striking. Questions like "Do you, my brothers, have complete faith in me?" and "Are we the ones to blame?" are designed to provoke an immediate emotional response from the audience (Rahman). These questions are not meant to be answered verbally but serve to engage the audience's emotions and reinforce their solidarity with the speaker. Goffman's theory supports this, noting that such techniques help to manage impressions and elicit desired responses from the audience (Goffman 44).

The call-and-response technique is another powerful tool employed by Bangabandhu. When he says, "The struggle this time is a struggle for emancipation! The struggle this time is a struggle for independence!" he invites the audience to respond, creating a rhythmic and participatory dynamic (Rahman). This method resonates with Schechner's concept of performance as a ritualistic act, where the audience's participation enhances the overall impact and meaning of the performance (Schechner 48-49).

Crowd reactions also play a crucial role in his speech. His ability to read and respond to the audience's reactions in real-time demonstrates a deep understanding of performative dynamics. For instance, when the crowd reacts with cheers or chants, he pauses to let the emotion swell, then continues with increased fervor. This interplay between speaker and audience creates a powerful feedback loop, reinforcing the communal identity and shared purpose of the moment.

These interactive techniques are instrumental in forging a collective identity among the audience. By addressing the audience directly and encouraging their participation, he transforms individual listeners into a cohesive, mobilized group. This collective identity is crucial for political movements, as it fosters a sense of unity and shared purpose.

Goffman's concept of the front stage performance is evident here, where the speaker manages impressions to maintain the audience's engagement and reinforce their sense of solidarity (Goffman 142). Schechner's performance theory further elucidates how these interactions serve a ritualistic function, binding the audience together in a shared emotional and symbolic experience (Schechner 31).

Critics like Victor Turner have highlighted the role of performance in creating and maintaining communal identities. Turner argues that performances, especially those

with strong ritualistic elements, can serve to reinforce social bonds and collective values (Turner 22). Bangabandhu's speech, with its rich interactive dynamics, exemplifies this process, as it not only conveyed a political message but also reinforced the cultural and emotional ties among the Bengali people.

Goffman's and Schechner's theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the significance of audience engagement in political oratory. Goffman's dramaturgical analysis highlights how direct interaction helps manage impressions and maintain audience engagement, ensuring the speaker's message is effectively conveyed and received (Goffman 22). Schechner's performance theory adds depth to this analysis by emphasizing the ritualistic and symbolic dimensions of audience interaction, where participation becomes an integral part of the performance's meaning and impact (Schechner 48-49).

Kenneth Burke's rhetorical theory also supports this view, suggesting that identification is a key element in rhetoric, where the speaker seeks to create a sense of commonality with the audience through shared symbols and emotional resonance (Burke 20). This identification process is evident in Bangabandhu's speech, where his direct engagement techniques foster a deep emotional connection with the audience, reinforcing their collective identity and shared purpose.

VI. SYMBOLISM AND RITUALISTIC ELEMENTS

Restored behavior and ritual are central concepts in Richard Schechner's performance theory. Restored behavior refers to actions that are repeated and embedded with cultural or symbolic meaning, often performed in various contexts to evoke specific responses or convey particular messages (Schechner 31). Rituals, in this context, are formalized, repetitive actions that hold significant cultural and symbolic weight. These concepts help to understand how certain behaviors and symbols in performances, such as political speeches, resonate deeply with audiences.

VII. IDENTIFICATION AND ANALYSIS OF SYMBOLIC ACTS IN THE SPEECH

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's March 7, 1971 speech is rich with symbolic acts that draw on historical events, cultural symbols, and collective memories to create a powerful narrative. One notable symbolic act is his reference to past sacrifices: "We gave blood in 1952, we won a mandate in 1954" (Rahman). This statement evokes the collective memory of the Bengali people's long struggle

for autonomy and justice, reinforcing their shared identity and purpose.

His speech is replete with references to significant historical events, such as the Language Movement of 1952 and the Six-Point Movement of 1966. These references serve as powerful cultural symbols, reminding the audience of their shared history and the sacrifices made for their cause. By invoking these collective memories, he strengthens the emotional and cultural bonds among his listeners, creating a sense of unity and shared purpose. Goffman's dramaturgical analysis supports this, suggesting that performers use such references to manage audience impressions and reinforce their intended message (Goffman 160).

The repeated references to historical events and cultural symbols in his speech contribute to its ritualistic nature. These elements transform the speech into a ritual performance, where the audience collectively participates in remembering and reaffirming their shared history and identity. Schechner's performance theory highlights how such ritualistic elements can elevate a performance, imbuing it with deeper meaning and emotional resonance (Schechner 48-49). This ritualistic dimension is crucial in political oratory, as it helps to mobilize and unify the audience around a common cause.

The ritualistic elements in his speech play a critical role in mobilizing the audience and fostering a sense of unity. By invoking collective memories and cultural symbols, he creates a shared emotional experience that strengthens the audience's resolve and commitment to the cause. Victor Turner's analysis of ritual performances supports this view, noting that rituals can reinforce social bonds and collective identities, thereby facilitating collective action (Turner 22). Bangabandhu's speech, through its ritualistic nature, not only conveys a political message but also galvanizes the audience into a unified and mobilized force.

VIII. PRACTICAL AND SOCIETAL IMPLICATIONS

The performative techniques demonstrated in his speech remain highly relevant in contemporary political oratory. Politicians and leaders continue to use gestures, vocal dynamics, and symbolic references to engage and mobilize their audiences. Understanding these techniques can enhance the effectiveness of political communication, helping leaders to connect more deeply with their constituents and convey their messages more powerfully.

The analysis of his speech provides valuable insights into how performance can be used in political leadership and mobilization. By integrating performative elements such as gestures, vocal techniques, and symbolic references, leaders

can create more impactful and resonant speeches. This understanding can inform the strategies of contemporary political leaders, helping them to craft performances that inspire and mobilize their audiences.

Recognizing political speeches as performances has significant societal implications. It underscores the importance of critical engagement with political discourse, encouraging audiences to consider not only the content of a speech but also the performative strategies employed. This perspective can foster a more informed and discerning electorate, capable of critically analyzing the rhetoric and performances of political leaders.

The analysis of Bangabandhu's speech through the lenses of Goffman's and Schechner's theories can inform future research and practice in political communication. Scholars can explore how these theories apply to various political contexts and leaders, expanding our understanding of the interplay between performance and politics. Practitioners can use these insights to enhance their communication strategies, creating more effective and resonant political performances.

IX. CONCLUSION

In examining Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's March 7, 1971 speech through the lenses of Erving Goffman's dramaturgical analysis and Richard Schechner's performance theory, several key points and findings emerge. Bangabandhu's adept use of gestures, vocal dynamics, and direct audience interaction transformed his speech into a powerful act of political theatre. By invoking historical events, cultural symbols, and collective memories, he created a ritualistic performance that mobilized and unified his audience.

The significance of performative analysis in understanding his speech lies in its ability to reveal the underlying mechanisms of his rhetorical success. Goffman's concept of impression management and Schechner's notion of restored behavior elucidate how he crafted his public persona, engaged his audience, and embedded his speech with deep cultural and emotional resonance. This analysis highlights the strategic use of performative techniques to convey complex political messages and foster a collective identity.

At the intersection of politics and performance, his speech exemplifies how leaders can leverage performative strategies to inspire and mobilize their audiences. The application of performance theory to political oratory underscores the importance of understanding speeches as not merely verbal communications but as multifaceted performances that engage audiences on multiple levels. This perspective encourages a more nuanced appreciation of

political discourse and the critical role of performance in effective leadership.

In conclusion, the performative elements of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's March 7, 1971 speech offer valuable insights into the power of political oratory. By blending Goffman's and Schechner's theories, this analysis provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how gestures, vocal techniques, and symbolic acts can enhance the impact of political speeches. Recognizing the performative nature of political communication can inform both scholarly research and practical strategies in political leadership, underscoring the enduring relevance of performance in mobilizing and uniting audiences.

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