

Understanding and Performing Silence in Dance

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Abstract

Silence in performance has often been explored in theatre, yet its role in dance remains an under-examined study area. While theatre can exist as a standalone medium, dance and music often rely on additional elements to create meaning. This paper investigates silence as an active choreographic element in dance, examining how movement, stillness, and the absence of sound contribute to performance dynamics. By questioning how silence is embodied in movement, this study explores whether silence in dance functions merely as an absence of sound or if it extends beyond that, shaping the performer's expression and the audience's perception. In this paper, we examine a few productions, such as Peter Brook's concept of "The Empty Space" and the works of choreographers such as Chandralekha, Akram Khan, and Astad Deboo; their modern approaches and use of the element of silence in the way they have perceived, observed, and analysed in the performance space. Additionally, this paper will also explore the influence of culture and regional context on the use of elements in productions, the style of dance (whether classical or folk), and, of course, the treatment of space and techniques. Methodologically, this study employs performance analysis, choreographic case studies, and audience reception studies to understand how silence is choreographed and received. Through this lens, the paper aims to reveal how dance can convey meaning through silence, creating an immersive experience that transcends verbal or musical articulation.

Keywords: stillness, silence in dance, choreography

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Introduction

The relevance of studying silence in performance and dance is both significant and multifaceted, providing valuable insights into the nature of expression, communication, and embodied presence within the performing arts. While silence is conventionally perceived as a mere absence of sound or activity, this interpretation overlooks its profound dramaturgical, choreographic, and metaphorical importance. In contemporary performance scholarship, silence is increasingly recognized as an active force that structures time, accentuates meaning, and enables nuanced forms of engagement between performers and audiences. This section outlines the relevance of investigating silence in dance and performance through an academically rigorous lens, demonstrating how silence functions as a vital element within artistic practices and theoretical frameworks.

Traditionally, the primary vehicles of meaning in performance have been regarded as sound, speech, and music. The assumption persists that expressivity is fundamentally rooted in the audible or the articulate, and that the absence of these elements connotes emptiness or void. However, a growing body of research in performance studies, theatre, and choreography has challenged this presumption, proposing instead that silence is a generative site of presence and potentiality. By attending rigorously to silence, scholars and practitioners alike are invited to reconsider how meaning is produced, communicated, and received in the performing arts.

Studying Silence as Different Tools

Silence as a Dramaturgical Structure

From a dramaturgical perspective, silence is not an empty interval but a meaningful structuring device. It organizes time and narrative in ways that heighten dramatic tension, guide audience reflection, and delineate moments of transition. Silence can be wielded to punctuate action, sustain suspense, or invite introspection. The work of theatre director Peter Brook, for example, exemplifies how an “Empty space” enlivened by silence can be densely charged with theatrical potential. Such intervals of quietude are dramatic not simply by contrast but because they permit the proliferation of alternate meanings and interpretations, which would otherwise be occluded by the constant presence of sound or dialogue. Consequently, the dramaturgical employment of silence facilitates a deeper, more contemplative mode of spectatorship, in which audiences are encouraged to fill the seeming void with their own interpretations and emotions.

Silence as a Choreographic Resource

In choreographic terms, silence profoundly alters the perception and execution of movement. When auditory cues are absent, the body itself assumes the role of rhythmic and expressive agent. The works of choreographers such as Akram Khan, Chandralekha, and Astad Deboo, who have strategically integrated silence into their choreography, are worth noting. In addition to these, the approach to removing musical accompaniment in a body-based performance is explored. Each gesture, pause, and transition becomes focused with heightened significance to invite both dancer and audience to attune themselves to nuances that might otherwise be overshadowed.

Silence in choreography challenges performers to cultivate increased bodily awareness and intentionality. Freed from the structural constraints of sound, dancers engage with time, space, and movement in novel ways, often developing idiosyncratic vocabularies that emerge solely from their embodied presence. In this context, silence serves to democratize the elements of performance, granting equal or greater importance to the sometimes-overlooked aspects of breath, gravity, and stillness.

Silence as Performance, Metaphor, and Movement

Silence in performance can also be understood as both an act and a metaphor. As a performative strategy, it introduces new dynamics into the interaction between performers and audience members. Silence interrupts established patterns of expectation, producing moments of surprise, anticipation, or even discomfort. Such ruptures foster conditions in which both spectators and artists are compelled to listen, observe, and participate more actively, cultivating a heightened atmosphere of presence.

Metaphorically, silence is deeply polysemic, capable of signifying presence, absence, resistance, or spirituality depending on its cultural and socio-political context. In some instances, silence is evocative of meditation, withdrawal, or sacredness; in others, it constitutes a political act denoting refusal, protest, or critique. On an embodied level, silence in movement is realized through stillness, pause, or the invisible labor of preparation. These moments lend themselves to the communication of complex emotion and intention, demonstrating the body's capacity to "speak" powerfully in the absence of words or music.

Relevance to Contemporary Theory and Practice

The academic relevance of studying silence in dance and performance extends to both practice and theory. For practitioners, understanding silence as an active and meaningful force enriches creative possibilities and invites innovative approaches to composition and interpretation. It challenges artists to reconsider the centrality of sound, encouraging exploration of how movement, stillness, and absence might forge new aesthetic and communicative pathways. For scholars, silence opens productive avenues for critical inquiry into the politics of visibility, the dynamics of attention, and the limits of representation.

Furthermore, the deliberate study and application of silence are particularly pertinent in an era characterized by sensory overload and powerful noise. The intentional use of silence becomes a means of resistance—a space for reflection, recalibration, and counter-narrative. It invites audiences and artists alike to listen more deeply, to tune into the unspoken, and to appreciate the richness found in restraint and contemplation.

Choreographic techniques that create silence in dance work by emphasizing stillness, controlled breath, and the reduction or absence of movement, transforming silence from a mere lack of sound into an expressive bodily state. Some key techniques include:

1. Stillness or Arrested Movement: Complete cessation of motion, which requires significant physical control to maintain balance and presence.
2. Slow, Minimal Movement: Utilizing movement that is so gradual or reduced that it creates a sensation of quiet stillness.
3. Breath Control and Breath as Movement: Choreographers often focus on the dancer's breathing patterns as a part of silent expression, using deliberate inhalations,

exhalations, or breath holds that are felt more than heard, emphasizing the body's internal rhythms.

4. **Spatial Awareness and Use of Negative Space:** Techniques where dancers emphasize spatial relations and create “empty” zones onstage, which amplify the sensation of silence by drawing attention to absence as much as presence.
5. **Improvisation within a Silent Framework:** Some choreographers provide dancers with open-ended structures or scores that invite improvisation without sound, compelling performers to generate movement organically, often resulting in unpredictable silent interludes or pauses.
6. **“Silent Choreography” Exercises:** Using non-verbal embodiment of emotions or narratives often learned through rehearsed or improvised silent acting techniques, highlighting gesture and posture to communicate without sound.

Overall, these techniques reveal that silence in dance is not a void but a highly skilled, intentional, and expressive state that foregrounds the subtleties of the human body as a communicative instrument, achieving depth and presence through absence of external sound.

One major approach conceptualizes silence as a form of non-verbal communication that conveys meaning through intentional absence or withholding of speech or sound. This perspective sees silence as an active, strategic choice rather than a passive void, emphasizing silence's role in creating tension, signaling power dynamics, or evoking emotional and psychological states. For example, feminist and critical race theorists have explored silence as a marker of marginalized voices—both enforced and resistive—highlighting how silence can function politically in contexts of exclusion and oppression.

Another theoretical lens looks at silence through the framework of performative theory. This treats silence as “doing” rather than simply “being”—silence as an embodied act that shapes the interaction between performer and audience. In this view, silence contributes to the temporal, spatial, and affective rhythms of performance; it intervenes in meaning-making processes by inviting audience interpretation, contemplation, or empathy rather than dictating meaning through language or sound. Such a framework attends closely to the experiential qualities of silence—how it shapes presence, attention, and relational dynamics within the live event.

Semiotic and cultural studies frameworks analyze silence in terms of signs and meanings within specific cultural contexts. Silence can be coded with diverse meanings depending on social norms, rituals, and symbolic systems. It is not neutral but imbued with cultural significance that must be decoded, sometimes requiring insider cultural knowledge. This approach often intersects with ethnographic methods, examining how silence functions in ritual, ceremony, or conflict across groups and societies.

From a psychological and cognitive perspective, silence is associated with internal processes such as reflection, memory, and ideation. It is linked to modes of mental activity that underpin speech or action but remain pre-verbal or non-verbal. Such frameworks explore silence's mnemonic, evaluative, and intrapersonal dimensions—how silence structures thought and self-awareness in performance contexts as well as everyday interaction.

Finally, dramaturgical and choreographic theories focus on how silence structures the temporal and spatial architecture of performance. In dramaturgy, silence governs the pacing, tension, and narrative flow by interrupting speech and allowing unspoken subtext to emerge.

In choreography, silence is embodied through stillness, breath, and spatial dynamics, actively reshaping the language of movement. These frameworks investigate silence as a compositional and expressive element that challenges assumptions about sound's primacy in dance and theatre.

In sum, these diverse theoretical frameworks reveal silence as a rich, multidimensional phenomenon in performance—one that functions at once linguistically, politically, culturally, psychologically, and artistically. Understanding and analyzing silence requires interdisciplinary tools that account for its complexity as both an absence and a presence, a disruption and a creation of meaning within performative acts.

Case Studies

***XENOS* by Akram Khan (2018)**

Akram Khan's *XENOS* is a profound meditation on the fractured identities and dualities of the colonial Indian soldier during the First World War, skillfully merging elements of kathak and contemporary dance to illuminate the beauty and horror of the human condition. Drawing from twentieth-century archives, Khan (2018) gives poetic voice to the "shell-shocked dream" of a colonial soldier, creating a physical and emotional landscape shaped by trauma, conflict, and memory. The production negotiates the liminal borderlands between East and West, past and present, and the intricate intersections of mythology, technology, and history.

Expansion and Context

XENOS is set against a backdrop that initially resembles a traditional Indian durbar—a gathering rich with rugs and intricate musical interplay. However, as the narrative advances, this scene is abruptly stripped away: the trappings of the durbar are winched into darkness, replaced with minimalist and brutal imagery evocative of the trenches of World War I. Khan's transformation from a revered dancer into a conscripted soldier—his body rendered an "instrument of war"—establishes the central arc of the performance. Through precise and articulate physical language, Khan (2018) embodies the collective psychic wound of countless unnamed soldiers.

The score, oscillating between lush vocals, frenetic percussion, and jarring silences, amplifies the sense of fragmentation. Musicians, sometimes present on stage and sometimes retreating into shadow, become part of the work's shifting world. The movement language alternates between fluid kathak and jagged, jarring contemporary sequences, the choreography reflecting both cultural synthesis and psychic rupture.

Analysis: Elements of Silence

Silence proves fundamental to *XENOS*, operating as a dramaturgical force that disrupts, punctuates, and underscores the performance's thematic concerns. Silence is not an absence but a heightened presence—an embodied void that invites the audience to confront the unspeakable trauma of war and displacement.

Dramaturgical Use. Silent moments arrive abruptly, suspending narrative flow and performance energy. For example, the music and movement may suddenly halt, leaving the stage in darkness or with a single shaft of light illuminating Khan's still, vulnerable form.

Choreographic Silence. Khan's (2018) use of stillness and minimal gesture creates embodied silence—the dancer's body tense, attentive, yet unmoving, vibrating withheld energy. Structural and Emotional Resonance: Silences highlight transitions between cultural worlds—between Kathak's lyricism and the fragmented, convulsive contemporary dance vocabulary. Silent spaces mark the dissolution of cultural boundaries and signal the inexpressibility of the soldier's trauma. When music or sound returns, its emotional impact feels amplified because of the preceding void, intensifying the performance's pathos.

In Akram Khan's (2018) *XENOS*, the interplay between Kathak rhythmic pauses and contemporary dance stillness produces a rich contrast that serves both aesthetic and thematic purposes. These forms of silence—distinctly rooted in their respective traditions—become essential tools for meaning-making and emotional resonance within the piece.

Kathak Rhythmic Pauses

Kathak, a classical Indian dance form, is renowned for its intricate rhythms, percussive footwork, and expressive storytelling. Pauses within Kathak are tightly interwoven with its music and rhythmic cycles (taal).

Contemporary Stillness

By contrast, the stillness characterizing contemporary dance in *XENOS* is less about rhythmic punctuation and more about existential presence and embodied reflection. Contemporary dance often uses stillness to disrupt movement, create emotional depth, or interrogate meaning apart from structured music or story. In Khan's (2018) choreography, contemporary stillness is marked by a suspension of time—a profound quiet that may last several seconds or longer, where the body appears at rest but is internally charged with emotion, memory, or unresolved tension.

SHARIRA by Chandralekha (2001)

Chandralekha's (2001) *Sharira* is a landmark work that interrogates the complexity of the female body, divine femininity, sexuality, and spirituality, while employing silence as a fundamental performative language. Through slow movement, carefully held postures, and extended pauses, *Sharira* crafts a meditative space that transcends spectacle, making silence both subject and substance of the dance.

Expansion and Context

At its core, *Sharira* is not about narrative in the conventional sense but about evoking an experience of the body as a site of creation, desire, and transcendence. The choreography diverges from traditional storytelling and instead emphasizes abstraction, slowness, and repetition. Two dancers—the female performing body often central—navigate through a tapestry of levels, postures, and spatial patterns that represent various energies associated with the feminine principle: creation, sensuality, nurture, and resistance.

The work's movement vocabulary draws heavily from yoga, kalaripayattu, and Indian classical dance, but is stripped of decorative gesture and dramatic excess. Instead, Chandralekha's focus is on the internal—the materiality of the body, the act of breathing, and the weight of presence. The performers' postures often channel archetypal forms, such as the

yoni (the triangle as a sign of female generative power), continually invoked not as an object for the male gaze but as an affirmation of autonomous, embodied sexuality and spiritual potency.

Analysis: Silence in Sharira

Silence in *Sharira* (2001) operates on multiple layers—aural, kinesthetic, and emotional:

- **Kinesthetic Silence:** Perhaps *Sharira*'s (2001) most radical element is its choreography of stillness and slowness. The dancers' extremely gradual, deliberate movements create a space thick with anticipation and contemplation. These pauses and held postures magnify even the slightest shift in tension or breath, inviting the audience to focus on the internal energies flowing through the bodies.
- **Aural Silence:** Often performed with minimal sound or music, much of *Sharira* unfolds against a sonic backdrop of near silence. This aural restraint compels viewers to attune to the dancers' breathing, the rustle of fabric, or the soft contact between body and floor—subtle reminders of organic life and the inner rhythms of existence. The absence of musical cueing places emphasis squarely on the material body and its energies, subverting the expectations of spectacle and providing an acoustic space for reflection and intimacy.
- **Symbolic and Dramaturgical Silence:** Chandralekha (2001) employs pauses and *talam* (internal rhythm) as dramaturgical tools, allowing every stillness to function as a site of transformation. Rather than denoting a mere stoppage, these silences are potent with suggestion: creation, waiting, refusal, and regeneration. In holding these postures, the dancers sculpt silence into a visible force, making the audience an active participant—leaning forward, engaged, resonating with the palpable tension and release that unfold across time and space.
- **Feminist and Political Silence:** Within the broader cultural context, the silence in *Sharira* can also be read as resistance to objectification and to conventional representations of femininity. By internalizing both protest and sexuality, Chandralekha's (2001) choreography directs expressive energy inward, situating silence as a marker of autonomy, subversion, and sacred power.

Postural stillness in performance serves as a powerful conduit for communicating divine femininity, drawing from deep spiritual, mythological, and somatic traditions. The concept of divine femininity encompasses qualities such as creation, receptivity, intuition, nurturing, and inner strength—attributes often represented through archetypal goddesses and symbols across cultures. Stillness becomes a means by which these aspects are embodied and made present on stage, resonating far beyond the absence of movement.

In sum, still postures serve as living icons of the divine feminine by:

- Evoking spiritual archetypes through shape, space, and minimalism
- Calling forth inner wisdom, serenity, and intuitive presence
- Affirming creative power and sensual wholeness without outward display
- Creating spaces of collective contemplation, healing, and renewal.

Through postural stillness, the feminine sacred is not simply represented but embodied, inviting the audience to witness, resonate, and perhaps access these energies within themselves.

Breaking Boundaries by Astad Deboo (2009)

Astad Deboo's (2009) initiative, *Breaking Boundaries*, stands as a pioneering and deeply inspiring project in contemporary Indian dance, particularly remarkable for its inclusive approach of training and performing with auditorily challenged and underprivileged performers from the Salaam Baalak Trust. This production and its rigorous training process offer a fascinating lens through which to study the element of silence in dance and the ways dance can exist and flourish without reliance on traditional musical accompaniment.

Training Process and Its Challenges

Deboo's work with these performers began without auditions, welcoming street children who came primarily with Bollywood or informal dance backgrounds and little to no formal training. The process was intensive and transformative, focusing on cultivating body awareness, control, and spatial sensitivity rather than traditional notions of rhythm tied to sound. Deboo (2009) emphasized minimalistic yet physically challenging choreography, where dancers learned to trust their bodies and each other while maneuvering highly controlled movements often performed in contained or unconventional spaces like benches.

The training encouraged exploring internal rhythms and bodily impulses, allowing performers to generate movement from their own physiological cues rather than external music. Deboo often worked with the dancers on breath control, kinesthetic listening, and physical connectivity to create a collective sense of timing and flow. The psychological support and camaraderie built through rehearsal were equally important, helping performers overcome personal and social barriers to unlock expressive potential and embodied confidence.

The Role of Silence in the Performance

Silence in *Breaking Boundarie* is not emptiness or absence; rather, it is a dynamic and essential presence. The minimal or delayed use of music—drums appear only near the end of the performance—means that silence becomes the default “soundscape” during much of the dance. This silence foregrounds the dancers' movements, breaths, and physical energy, transforming the body into the primary instrument of rhythm and expression.

Without external musical cues, performers learn to listen deeply—to one another, to the spatial environment, and to their own internal rhythms. This heightened awareness turns silence into an aural and spatial texture that shapes the dance's tension and release. The silence also intensifies the audience's focus on visual and kinesthetic elements, heightening the experience of collective breathing, balance, and trust that Deboo's choreography demands.

Dance Without Music: Expanding Perceptions

Breaking Boundaries demonstrates that dance can transcend the traditional interdependence on music or sound by centering movement as autonomous and self-sufficient. It challenges the assumption that music is always necessary to create rhythm and emotive power in dance, showing instead that silence can be a fertile ground for innovation and expression. The dancers' bodies generate their own rhythmic pulses through footwork, breath, and spatial interaction, underscoring the somatic dimension of performance.

Training Process: Embracing Silence

The training process for *Breaking Boundaries* began with performers from the Salaam Baalak Trust, many of whom came with limited dance experience and primarily Bollywood or informal movement backgrounds. Astad Deboo (2009) introduced them to a controlled, minimalistic aesthetic that contrasted sharply with their earlier training. Central to this method was the cultivation of heightened body awareness and trust, teaching dancers to embody rhythm and timing through internal cues—breath, muscle tension, and physical impulses—rather than relying on auditory signals.

Breath control exercises formed a cornerstone of training, enabling dancers to anchor themselves and find an internal pulse. Visual cues, such as hand signals and eye contact, replaced verbal counting, fostering ensemble coordination and spatial awareness. This approach not only adapted to the needs of hearing-impaired dancers but redefined how rhythm and musicality could be understood and embodied, emphasizing the body as a self-sufficient rhythmic instrument.

The performer's intention in using silence is central. It is a conscious act—an act of communication that transcends words or music. By deciding when to hold a pose, pause movement, or remove external auditory cues, the performer crafts a space where internal energies—such as breath, stillness, or subtle gestures—become the primary mode of expression. These moments are often deliberately held, with complete awareness of their impact, reinforcing the spiritual or emotional message that the performer aims to project.

Equally vital is the audience's role—the receiver's interpretive framework. The audience's perception of silence depends greatly on their emotional and cultural state, their capacity for empathy, and their openness to non-verbal cues. When the “wavelengths” between the performer and the audience match—meaning the audience is receptive and attuned—the silence becomes a shared, almost sacred space of understanding. In this state, silence can evoke a profound sense of presence, creating an embodied experience where meaning is felt rather than spoken. It fosters a heightened connection, inviting viewers to experience the subtle energies of the body, breath, and environment without external distraction.

This phenomenon—where performer intention and audience reception synchronize—is often considered the pinnacle of effective silent performance. It's as if both parties are tuned into a similar frequency, where the unspoken dialogue between body and mind, between performer and observer, becomes a form of silent poetry. When this wavelength alignment occurs, the impact of silence intensifies; the performance becomes a vessel of spiritual and emotional resonance, often leaving a lasting impression that words cannot capture.

The challenge—and the extraordinary potential—of silence in performance lies in this matching of wavelengths. As difficult as it is to cultivate such an attunement, it is also the element that renders silence most effective. It requires a high degree of self-awareness and emotional intelligence from the performer, who must embody the intention of the silence, and a deep receptivity from the audience. The result is an immersive experience where silence is not an absence but a presence—an active state of being that communicates beyond the limits of language or sound.

Conclusion

Silence, as intentionally employed in performance, is a profound act of shared presence. It highlights the performer's conscious choice to communicate without words, while relying on the audience's openness to receive and interpret this non-verbal dialogue. When their wavelengths match—when intention and reception align—silence becomes a potent channel for authentic, transformative exchange that resonates beyond the physical space, touching the spiritual core of human experience.

The paper discusses different projects by contemporary choreographers and analyzes the element of silence as observed by the author. While the observations are grounded in subjective interpretation, they are guided by identifiable factors that frame and support the overall inquiry. In exploring how silence functions within dance, the study highlights that the absence of sound does not denote the absence of meaning or presence. Instead, silence becomes a powerful medium that allows the body to communicate, evoke emotion, and reshape perception.

By engaging with silence, choreographers and performers are invited to rediscover the body's intrinsic rhythm, texture, and expressive capacity. This approach celebrates stillness and quiet as active forces that can deepen the audience's experience, offering new ways to perceive time, space, and movement. The paper, therefore, serves as an invitation to artists, scholars, and audiences alike to reconsider the sensory boundaries of performance. It encourages an exploration of how silence can create resonance within and beyond the stage, transforming both the creative process and the act of witnessing.

Ultimately, this paper opens a reflective and imaginative space for dance to evolve beyond conventional dependencies on music or sound. It calls for continued experimentation, where silence is not merely the background or pause in performance but a vital performative element—capable of revealing the subtle, profound dialogues between the body, emotion, and perception.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The author further declares that, apart from Grammarly, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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