

Performing the Consciousness: Phenomenology of The Self and Existential Void in Katie Kitamura's *Audition* (2025)

Assist. Lect. Maytham Obada
College of Computer Science and Information Technology
University of Al-Qadisiyah
maitham.hamza@qu.edu.iq

Assist. Prof. Dr. Hiba Meteab Faja
College of Education
hibam.sultan@qu.edu.iq

Date Received : 18/11/2025

Date of Acceptness : 23/12/2025

Abstract

This research paper sheds light on the philosophical scopes of consciousness and selfhood in Katie Kitamura's *Audition* (2025); a novel that explores the boundaries of authenticity, emotion, and language. Employing existential phenomenology particularly Jean-Paul Sartre's notions of 'Being-for-itself' and 'Bad faith', along with Heidegger's 'Being-in-the-world' the research examines how Kitamura's protagonist performs identity in spaces of silence, displacement, and moral ambiguity.

The analysis argues that Kitamura transforms postmodern alienation into a new form of existential realism, where consciousness becomes both performance and prison. Through the phenomenology of perception, the study reveals how *Audition* redefines the ethical responsibility of self-representation in a fragmented modern world. Thus, this research contributes to the expanding dialogue between contemporary fiction and existential philosophy, offering one of the first comprehensive academic readings of *Audition*, accordingly establishing a fresh model of literary phenomenology for 21st-century narrative studies.

Key words: Authenticity, Consciousness, Existential Phenomenology, Katie Kitamura's *Audition*, Selfhood.

أداء الوعي: ظاهراتية الذات والفراغ الوجودي في رواية الاختبار

(2025) للكاتبة كايتي كيتامورا

ا.م.د. هبة متعب فجة الخزاعي

كلية التربية جامعة القادسية

م.م. ميثم عبد الحمزه جواد

كلية علوم الحاسوب وتكنولوجيا المعلومات/ جامعة القادسية

تاريخ الاستلام : 2025/11/18

تاريخ قبول النشر : 2025/12/23

الملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة الأبعاد الفلسفية للذات والوعي في رواية /الاختبار (2025) للكاتبة كايتي كيتامورا، وهي عمل أدبي يكشف حدود اللغة والعاطفة والأصالة. تعتمد الدراسة على المنهج الظاهراتي الوجودي، مستندة بشكل خاص إلى مفاهيم جان بول سارتر حول "الوجود لذاته" و"سوء النية"، بالإضافة إلى مفهوم مارتين هايدغر "الوجود في العالم"، لتحليل كيفية تجسيد بطلنة كيتامورا لهويتها ضمن فضاءات الصمت، والاعتراب، والالتباس الأخلاقي.

يرى التحليل أن كيتامورا تحوّل الاعتراب ما بعد الحداثي إلى شكل جديد من الواقعية الوجودية، حيث يغدو الوعي في آنٍ واحد فعلاً أدائياً وسجناً وجودياً. ومن خلال ظاهراتية الإدراك، تكشف الدراسة كيف تعيد رواية /الاختبار تعريف المسؤولية الأخلاقية لتمثيل الذات في عالم معاصر متشظّ. وبذلك، تسهم هذه الدراسة في إثراء الحوار المتنامي بين الأدب المعاصر والفلسفة الوجودية، مقدّمة إحدى أولى القراءات الأكاديمية الشاملة للرواية، ومؤسسة نموذجاً جديداً للظاهراتية الأدبية في دراسات السرد في القرن الحادي والعشرين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الظاهراتية الوجودية، الذات، الوعي، الأصالة، رواية /الاختبار لكاتبة كيتامورا

Introduction

"More and more often, I was surprised by the person in the mirror, it was not the lines at my mouth or the hollowness around my eyes, it was the lag in recognition that was the most troubling, the brief moment when I looked in the mirror and did not know who I was."
(Kitamura, 2025, p.26)

A writer born in 1979 in America, who has worked as a literary critic and journalist and now teaches creative writing at New York University, is the main focus of this research paper. This woman represents the voice of all educated women in the modern world—one who demonstrates intellectual depth and a profound understanding of human nature. Through her novels, Kitamura succeeds in achieving what many Victorian writers aspired to: having a voice. In *Jane Eyre* (1847), Charlotte Brontë posed a crucial question—can women, like men, have the right to speak freely and express their opinions, along with the freedom of choice? Kitamura, along with other female writers since the twentieth century, possesses this ability and makes excellent use of this opportunity.

She has written five novels to date. *Intimacies* was recognized as one of *The New York Times*' "10 Best Books of 2021," long listed for both the National Book Award and the PEN/Faulkner Award, and was a finalist for the Joyce Carol Oates Prize. It also earned a place among Barack Obama's favorite books of 2021 (Wu, 2023).

Her works, such as *The Longshot*, *A Separation*, *Audition*, have been translated into more than twenty languages and are currently being adapted for film and television. Kitamura has received numerous honors, including the Rome Prize in Literature and fellowships from the Lannan, Santa Maddalena, and Jan Michalski foundations. In addition to her fiction, she has contributed to major publications such as *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Guardian*, *Granta*, and *frieze*. Her most recent novel, *Audition*, was shortlisted for the 2025 Booker Prize (Mengestu, 2024).

As a result, (Savas, 2024) stated that it is significant to state Kitamura's fiction is well-known by its psychological insights, moral complexity, and understated exploration of alienation. In *Audition*, she extends these topics through the story of an actress whose identity gradually merges with the roles she performs, dissolving the line between authenticity and performance. The novel's interior focus and minimalist style invite philosophical reflection on consciousness, perception, and the performance of being. Yet, despite its philosophical potential, *Audition* has not been subject to scholarly examination making it an ideal text for a study grounded in existential phenomenology.

Furthermore, existential phenomenology is a philosophical approach that combines 'phenomenology which is the study of lived experience and consciousness, with 'existentialism that is the focus on individual existence, freedom, and meaning. It seeks to understand how human beings experience the world not as detached observers but as active participants whose perceptions, emotions, and choices give structure to reality. Thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty emphasized that our existence is always embodied, situated in context, and shaped by our relationships and

possibilities. In essence, existential phenomenology explores how people create meaning and identity through their direct, subjective engagement with the world (Fernandez, 2024).

Literature Review

Writing a literature review about a writer who is still active at the time of writing this paper can be challenging. When the author is new and early in her career, it becomes even more difficult for the researcher. Traditionally, literary studies focus on identifying a gap in existing research on a particular novel through scholarly articles. However, in this case, the situation is different, since a novel published only a few months ago has not yet generated academic studies only reviews. Therefore, there is no existing research gap to address. This paper is the first to discuss the novel through a philosophical interpretation.

Additionally, this section will address the writers other novels to highlight the nature and the academic style of the writer. The first novel she wrote is *The Longshot* (2009) which takes place in the few days before a mixed martial arts fight in Tijuana, Mexico. The story focuses on Cal, a fighter, and his trainer, Riley, as they prepare for a rematch against Rivera; an undefeated champion who once defeated Cal and changed how he saw himself. Kitamura, who used to train as a ballet dancer, writes about the physical and mental intensity of fighting, showing how mind and body work together under pressure. The reader only sees Cal and Riley through their fighting along with their movements, reactions, and instincts reveal who they are and how they see the world (Garner, 2021). This is a paper and not a thesis or dissertation .

At the same time, the characters and their struggles feel familiar, like those in many other sports stories. Kitamura seems aware of this and exaggerates the typical elements of the genre which are the sweat, pride, and masculinity to show how trapped her characters are in this repeated story. The reader already knows how it will end, and that sense of fate gives the story its emotional power. The characters seem to realize that their chance to rise above their limits is not real. Like her other novels, *The Longshot* preserves the intellectual depth of the readers and at the same time trying to show them that what they are witnessing is only powerful performance, but not completely real (Neumann, 2025).

Also, the second novel of Kitamura, *Gone to the Forest* (2013), happens in an indefinite colonial place and reveals the clash of a landowning individuals through civil conflict and political confusion. The novel tracks the character of Tom, who lives with his strict father on a far farm as rigidities rise among the native people and colonizers. Suddenly, when a vague girl called Carine reaches, her existence disturbs the delicate balance of authority within the family, revealing the gluttony, violence, and decline within their world. Within the themes of this novel, the writer shows domination, inheritance, and the ethical failure that habitually founds in colonial law (Hall, 2013).

Hence, in a review by Lidija Haas (April, 2025) debating the novel *A Separation* (2017), she stated that the story explores the actual core of grief experienced by a female who has lost several individuals of her family. Haas identified that the writer believes that no one can clearly show sorrow unless they have a nature of particular “blue” spirit or unhappiness. This reproduces the Kitamura's profound knowledge of human nature. This is clear through the narrative's inner monologues that expose the characters' internal thoughts.

Moreover, the writer's psychological understanding lasts in her other novel *Intimacies* (2021), that got many rewards. Haas declares that Kitamura's words had grown into a more wild and uncanny style, in which the struggles happens inside the minds of characters. She put this as a form of 'self-confinement inside narrative conventions,' which means that one moment or notion in factual life will induce many sentiments and ideas, reflecting the characters' continuous internal modifications. This shows Kitamura's capacity of control the reader's indulgence with the complicated covers of her writing form. The same perception is stated by Ian j. Battaglia (2021) in his criticism which noted that there is occasionally a hole between what the hero thinks about other characters and who they actually are or what they mean, but this occurs only a rare times. Mostly, Kitamura's views about them are precise and shown straight as they are.

Commenting on the novel's weak sides, Battaglia declared that Kitamura makes a net of associated characters, but none of them feel actually essential. At the first chapters, the heroin visits her friend Jana for dinner in her new region in The Hague. Even though Jana claimed that the neighborhood is safe, she becomes stunned after an attack occurs outside her construction. She becomes peculiarly obsessed on the case, especially on the man who was confronted. Later, she appears at a dinner with the wounded man and his sister, who has since become her friend. They share fears about what truly occurred throughout the attack, and the heroin looks to approve that their doubts were right. Yet, this revelation improves little emotive weight to the novel. Oddly, the man's unintentional work event at dinner becomes more appealing than the crime itself.

On the contrary, Natchez (2025) believed that in *Intimacies*, Kitamura weaves her themes of passivity and performance into a clear moral and political critique. The narrator works at a court where dramatic trials take place and begins to feel uneasy and guilty for translating the words of people who have committed horrific crimes. She also feels discomfort in performing the testimonies of the victims. The story suggests that we should not try to humanize such criminals by exploring their psychology — their words and actions already reveal who they are. The court itself embodies hypocrisy, as it never brings powerful U.S. leaders to trial for their well-known crimes. The narrator, being a traveler and a person of colour, acknowledges her own small complicity in this flawed system, admitting, "I wasn't one of them; I didn't have it in me" (Interview with Kitamura, 2025).

These four novels are followed by *Audition*, the most recent work to date. It was published on April 8, 2025, by Riverhead Books. This novel will serve as the main focus of this paper, as will be discussed in the analysis chapter following the theoretical framework.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis of any literary work requires the adaptation of a particular theoretical/conceptual approach. Typically, to achieve this, the researcher explores the realms of philosophy, psychology, or sociology. For the present study, the focus lies within the field of philosophy specifically, the theory of existentialism alongside the phenomenology of perception and consciousness. Both philosophies test the traditional knowledge of the

association between body and mind, highlighting the embodiment, lived experience, and the human's conflict with the meaninglessness or meaning of existence.

Existentialism can be defined as a philosophical conception that emphasizes mainly on the human struggle to live an authentic life in spite of the illogicality or uselessness of existence (Aho, 2023). This theory accompanied in its way many prominent names which changed the stream of human intellectuality forever. One of them is Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980) who provide an ontological explanation of what it means to be human. This ontology's primary characteristics are the profound freedom and groundlessness that define the human dilemma. The unproblematic nature of the world of things is contrasted with these. The constantly precarious coexistence of facts and freedom in an uncaring world is given dramatic expression by Sartre's extensive literary output.

In *Being and Nothingness* (2022), Sartre posits that consciousness is defined by nothingness, it is not a thing but a perpetual movement of becoming. Because existence precedes essence, the human being must continually create meaning through action and choice. Furthermore, he distinguishes two sorts of reality which lie beyond our conscious experience: the consciousness or the awareness itself and the being of the object of consciousness. The latter exists unconventionally and without relation, or 'in-itself.' Though it is impossible to understand inside a conscious experience, consciousness is always consciousness 'of something;' meaning it is defined in reference to something else; it exists as 'for-itself.' The negative force of consciousness, which allows us to perceive 'nothingness,' is a fundamental aspect of it. The self is likewise affected by this power, which results in an innate lack of self-identity. Therefore, rather than being a given, the self's unity is viewed as a duty for the for-itself (Manhai, 2024).

In addition to Sartre, Martin Heidegger, in *Being and Time* (2025), provides the ontological foundation for both phenomenology and existentialism. His concept of Being-in-the-world describes existence as fundamentally relational: the human being is always already situated within a meaningful context. Heidegger's concepts of authenticity and thrownness highpoint the being's conflict with the circumstances of existence that they did not select, nevertheless should answer to.

Heidegger's beliefs presents the philosophy of the existential void, not as only emptiness but as a exposure of being itself. When people meet the void beneath existence through nervousness, loneliness, or loss they become conscious of the instability and eventuality of their own being. This clash unlocks the opportunity of authenticity: a consciousness of one's finitude and the choice to act profoundly within it (Philipse, 2021).

Along with Heidegger and Sartre, came Edmund Husserl who established the philosophy of Phenomenology and later developed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. This theory focuses on the analysis of phenomena as they seem in real life. It discards the view of consciousness as a disconnected or merely intellectual ability, producing it instead as premeditated always presented toward the world. Merleau-Ponty, in *Phenomenology of Perception* (2013), stresses that the physical body is not an object among others but the main place of understanding the world. The physical body works as consciousness-in-action; it perceives, construes, and creates meaning throughout interaction and movement. In consequence, perception is not inactive reception but active engagement.

In this observation, the self cannot be detached from the world it dwells. Experience is always personified, located, and intersubjective. Phenomenology so becomes a process of enlightening how meaning comes from the dynamic connection between perceived and perceiver. The human subject is assumed as a being that both shapes and is shaped by its world, a consciousness that performs itself through lived experience (Alamyar, 2024).

Along came Fernandez (2024) who claimed that the convergence of phenomenology and existentialism provides a comprehensive philosophical lens for examining the relationship between consciousness, embodiment, and meaning. Phenomenology emphasizes the HOW of experience; the lived and embodied structures through which consciousness engages with the world, while existentialism emphasizes the WHY the freedom, responsibility, and anguish inherent in human self-creation. Together, they offer a view of consciousness as both performative and ontological: a dynamic process through which being seeks to affirm itself amid uncertainty and the ever-present void of existence.

Analysis

In an interview published on August 14, 2025, Kitamura stated that writing *Audition* stemmed from a desire to depict the long process through which children grow up and inevitably become strangers to their parents. She wanted to explore how universal experiences such as motherhood and love can feel mutually exclusive. Kitamura further explained that readers of the novel must hold two separate versions of events in their minds "It's either/or, and also and." She stressed the significance of acceptance paradoxes, even though we live in a time of growing intellectual and philosophical difference.

The novel tackles the life of an actress who tries to disclose the changes between her real life and the roles she acts. At times, acting these roles can cloud her sense of identity, making it hard to differentiate what is real from what is not. Yet, one way or another, she is eventually confronted with reality;

I've experienced it myself, I continued, it's something that happens every time I prepare for a role. In some ways the part is only working if I lose sight of the shore. But at the same time, it's important to be able to come out the other side, you have to be able to come up for air. Otherwise, you won't survive. (p.48)

Additionally, through reading the book, it becomes apparent that the novel unfolds as a long monologue by a woman who possesses a deep sense of self-awareness, demonstrated through her ability to observe and describe herself and those around her. She embodies consciousness and perception, allowing her to acknowledge her own existence. "It was not that I forgot about the audience or the parameters and construction of the set. It was that here, the gap between my private and performed selves collapsed, and for the briefest of moments there was only a single, unified self" (p. 67) Therefore, through this ability to know her true self, the heroine reflects Sartre's notion of authenticity and, ultimately, her own existence.

Also, one can notice that the novel does not focus on multiple actions; rather, it unfolds through a long intellectual exploration of the postmodern woman's reflection. The husband, Tomas, and the vague presence of a son named Xavier, whether he is truly her son or not, create the climax in the novel. This vagueness, noticeable by both the lack of validation and denial, remains unsolved by the end. Consequently, maternity is portrayed as a vague

presence or absence: "I turned to look at Xavier and then I saw it—the similarity between us, which was more than the fact of our shared race; it was an echo or mirroring in our features that had no explanation, no purpose" (p.16).

The heroine's life without a child is itself an event; the lack becomes a performative space into which Xavier seems to emerge or perhaps merely appear to do so. From an existential perspective, maternity is not merely a biological matter but a narrated and enacted condition, in which its absence can produce an existential void that the heroine experiences as both dread and freedom. Kitamura's structural choice creates transformation of absence into a narrative engine through which the existential void becomes productive of alternate identities.

In the early chapters of the novel and, in fact, throughout the entire narrative the narrator consistently demonstrates a profound self-awareness that reflects a phenomenological perception: "I also had an instinct for self-preservation. I knew how to draw the lines firmly and rapidly when necessary, how to pull down the shutter and withdraw" (p.14). This awareness may result from her extensive experience in playing different roles. Stepping into others' shoes offers her insights into understanding the self: "I've experienced it myself," I continued, "it's something that happens every time I prepare for a role. In some ways the part is only working if I lose sight of the shore. But at the same time, it's important to be able to come out the other side you have to be able to come up for air. Otherwise, you won't survive" (p.48). Here, perception, according to Merleau-Ponty, is implicit and habituated; it helps clarify the source of her unease. When habitual perception weakens, the habitual body becomes an object: unfamiliar, distant, and uncanny. As the narrator explains, "I had tried many times to explain this compulsion to myself it was a way of being in the world, of relating to the life that was taking place around me; it was a question of being open" (p.18).

For further clarification, the setting of the novel centers on rehearsal not merely as the narrator's profession, but as a means of self-discovery. During the auditions she undertakes, she performs roles until her responses become second nature. Still, Kitamura contraries this hierarchy: in the story, everyday life itself develops into a long audition for understood roles such as mother, partner, and witness. This conflation forms an act epistemology in which the only way to 'know' or to declare the self is through performance, whether in arty portrayal or in social connections that require a public individuality; "Parts—a word that implied that there were parts and then there was a whole, into which those parts might cohere, a whole that might be a play or a film or a series, a whole that might even be a career, a body of work that could exist in the public imagination" (p.48). This reproduces an existential phenomenology, demonstrating how these stage acts disclose through first-person awareness. As a consequence, the story presents an vital comparison: performance is consciousness, and consciousness is performance.

The theory of phenomenological existentialism typically reflects the concept of intersubjectivity (Fernandez, 2024), which occurs when other people contribute to the formation of our sense of self. In the novel, the character of Xavier and his relationship with the narrator—along with the husband's reactions and the gazes of the audience both in the social world and on the stage mirror this intersubjectivity that destabilizes identity. Sartre's

notion of 'the look', or the experience of being objectified by others, is clearly manifested here. The heroine perceives herself as being seen, which in turn confirms her self-awareness:

And I wondered also if that wasn't the point of a performance, that it preserved our innocence, that it allowed us to live with the hypocrisies of our desire. Because in fact we don't want to see the thing itself, on a screen or on a stage—we don't want to see actual pain or suffering or death, but its representation. Our awareness of the performance is what allows us to enjoy the emotion, to creep close to it and breathe in its atmosphere; performance allows this dangerous proximity" (p.54).

Thus, Kitamura's heroine is simultaneously both agent and spectacle, and the narrative suggests that selfhood exists within the liminal space between being observed and performing. Eventually, these clarifications link phenomenology (the phenomenon of lived experience) and performance notion (the reiterative roles that produce social individuality), presenting that *Audition* produces a rich field for philosophical echo on modern subjectivity.

Conclusion

Audition stages an interior crisis as a public performance, making theatrical technique the mechanism by which consciousness is lived, narrated, and contested. Kitamura's minimalist prose and formal doubling create a phenomenological field in which the self is neither a stable nucleus nor a mere social mask but a continuously enacted accomplishment which one that depends on memory, mimicry, the gaze of others, and an often-terrifying void of non-recognition. The novel thereby functions as a contemporary meditation on what it means to be a self in a world where roles are demanded and rehearsals never end.

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