Refusal of Sartre's "Hell is other people" in Sai Paranjape's *Aalbel*

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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Abstract

Reception of the literary and philosophical works from Europe is often seen in Marathi literary world. One such philosophy is Existentialism. Marathi authors have received the European, especially French Existentialism, and adapted it to their own society and culture. In the process, it is to examine whether they accept and present the philosophy *per se*, they refuse it or they modify it. This paper examines one of such receptions where the Marathi author rejects the conclusion of Sartrean Existentialist philosophy as presented in his play *No-Exit*.

Keywords

Existentialism, Reception, Philosophy, Literary influence.

Introduction

Existentialism is a philosophical and literary movement centered around human being and thus studies the problems related to human existence. This movement mainly started in Europe and flourished a lot in France during the 20th century. We see that several philosophers and writers elaborated their existentialist ideas through their philosophical and artistic works. Interestingly their ideas are not confined to the geographical boundaries of their corresponding countries. New means of communication had made it possible for these ideas to travel around the world and to influence other authors and writers in different countries. These authors and writers engaged themselves with the philosophy in question. They processed these works so as to make them adaptable to their own cultures and societies. It would be relevant to reflect that whether they 'reproduce' the philosophy *per se* or while processing they create a new modified philosophical system. Their engagement with the philosophy thus remains problematic. We have noticed the processing of the philosophy at different levels though only in artistic works and not in philosophical work as such. In Bhau Padhye's *Barrister Aniruddha Dhopeshwarkar*,[1] we see the acceptance of philosophy as a kind of reproduction of Camus' Meursault can be noticed. In Mahesh Elkunchwar's *Eka Mhataryacha Khoon*[2],we can notice hypothetical demonstration of Sartrean idea that freedom creates anxiety[3]. This reception of French works created a possibility of creating new philosophies and new artistic works in India.

The influence of existentialism in India in at considerable extent. We know that during the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, India was colonized by England. The learning of English made compulsory by the English Education Act of 1835[4] under the regime of William Bentinck created the

June to August 2022   www.amoghvarta.com.com
A Double-blind, Peer-reviewed, Quarterly, Multidiciplinary and bilingual Research Journal

**Impact Factor
SJIF (2022): 4.824**

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possibility of access to the literatures of other countries. This gave Indians a new vision of the world. They became aware of philosophizing the problems human beings were facing in the face of 20th century. This exchange of philosophical ideas led the Indians to produce new literary works. Marathi literature does not make an exception. This article proposes to study one such reception of the existentialist philosophy in Marathi language. As discussed earlier the engagement of the authors is at different levels, the author and the work we have chosen for this article is Sai Paranjape's play *Aalbel*.[5] Sai Paranjape engages with Sartrean philosophy and refuses his concept of "L'enfer, c'est les autres" (Trans. "Hell is other people"). We can notice the archetype of her play in Sartre's *Huis-Clos*[6] (Trans. No-Exit).

After reading the Marathi play in the light of existentialism and its French archetypal play, we can see that this reading raises the following problematic. Does Paranjape's diversion form Sartrean philosophy leads to other philosophical system? Does it result in a new artistic or emotional creation? Considering the engagement of the Marathi author, it is to examine the balancing of the artistic and philosophical elements in her play. We have noticed that Paranjape demonstrates the acceptance of other Sartrean ideas but refuses his conclusion. This gives us an opportunity to demonstrate that the chosen Marathi work can be seen at extent as reformulation of Sartrean ideas but refusal of his conclusion of "Hell is other people". To verify this, we propose the following methodology.

Methodology

We propose to analyse the play *Aalbel* in the light of its archetypal play *No-Exit* and Existentialism. Firstly, artistic and philosophical demonstration of *No-Exit* will be taken into account. We will explore how Sartre's philosophical concepts operate in this play. We will be examining the manifestations through which Sartre arrives at the conclusion of his philosophy. The second part will be focused on the Marathi play and the elements therein which allow Paranjape to refuse Sartrean conclusion of his philosophy. We also intend to examine the extent the success or failure of this attempted rebuttal.

The methodology used for the above discussed points will be essentially interpretative and descriptive. In this methodology we will be analyzing the data (the content of the play) taking into consideration the pre-requisite knowledge (Existentialist philosophy). In order to do this, we need to understand the existentialist concepts, especially Sartre's notion of consciousness, for the analysis present in this article.

Sartre's notion of consciousness

To better understand Sartre's notion of consciousness, it would be useful to understand this notion explained by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), a German philosopher. His philosophy aims to study what remains if we separate the external world from consciousness. He explains that being conscious is always about being conscious *of something*. In other words, one cannot be conscious in vacuum. Consciousness always has an outside object towards which it aims. The philosopher calls this phenomenon "intentionality". The separation of the object of consciousness and consciousness itself would result in pure consciousness and pure intentionality which practically would not exist without one and the other. In this way, Husserl's philosophy reveals the nature of pure consciousness and therefore of pure intentionality. According to Husserl, intentionality is the essential character of consciousness. So, unlike Descartes, Husserl asserts that the external world is necessary for consciousness and so is it for existence.

It would be useful to note that Descartes and Husserl consider the *ego* or *self* to be very important since it is the basis for unifying the experiences of consciousness. On the other hand, Sartre rejects this idea and this function of the *self*. He explains that neither the world created the *self* nor the *self* created the world. They are two independent objects and it is through consciousness that they are united. So he

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A Double-blind, Peer-reviewed, Quarterly, Multidiciplinary and bilingual Research Journal

Impact Factor
SJIF (2022): 4.824

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asserts that it is not the consciousness that creates the world. The existence of consciousness depends on the prior existence of the world. In other words, consciousness exists as being conscious *ofsomething* and therefore this something must necessarily exist for consciousness to be conscious of it. So consciousness creates what already exists through its interpretation. It is in this way that the observation "I think, therefore I am" of Descartes could be modified from a Sartrean point of view as "There is consciousness, therefore I am". We therefore allow ourselves to deduce that consciousness is an indispensable part of a being in Sartre. Therefore, it is worth studying Sartre's elaboration of the notion of being.

The being defined by Sartre is quite different from the one defined by Plato. According to Plato, the world we live in is an imperfect image of a 'higher' world. Unlike Plato's idea of an imaginary world or even that of Descartes, Sartre explains to us different types of a being instead of different spheres of a being. Mainly, Sartre makes a distinction between two forms of a being – being in itself and being for itself.

With regard to the concept of the *in-itself*, this notion refers to non-human objects. Unlike humans, non-human objects do not have the ability to be aware of their existence. For example, trees do not have the ability to reflect on themselves. That is to say, they are not aware of their identity. So, the *in-itself* concerns the phenomenon of being of an existing object. It is simply the act of 'existing' which separates itself from consciousness. In other words, the *in-itself* is the way of being of physical things.

To further elaborate this notion, Sartre gives us an example of a letter opener. A letter opener exists in the fixed world but is unaware of its existence or identity. In addition, it has a specific function in the world. Therefore, a letter opener is a complete or finished being in itself. It does not evolve over time like a human being. So, according to Sartre, the non-human objects are there, unchanged. Here we see that the fundamental difference between the *in-itself* and the *for-itself* is the absence of consciousness in the *in-itself*.

Regarding the *for-itself*, Sartre explains that, unlike the notion of the *in-itself*, this notion concerns the human being. That is to say, this notion concerns a being who is able to reflect on himself/herself, who is aware of his/her existence, of his/her identity. This fact of being conscious brings us back to the notion of nothingness. When a human being is born, his/her consciousness is initially empty. This void is gradually filled by the consciousness of the world. It is consciousness that engenders the negation of the *in-itself*.

In this way, consciousness is this nothingness that causes negation to be introduced in the world so that a being is transformed into what it is not. This is how a human being evolves to shape his/her future. This evolution of human being is done through the choices that he/she makes among the several possibilities. Although this freedom is frightening and creates existential angst in order to define oneself, a human being cannot escape it from which Sartre's observation comes: "To be free is to be condemned to be free".[7]

Sartre establishes the difference discussed above between a letter opener and a human being. The latter is free to create and give meaning to his/her life. The fact that the human being chooses his/her actions brings us back to the idea that the human being, unlike a letter opener, does not have a fixed function. There is no reason for its existence. One gives meaning to one's existence through actions that one chooses. This allows Sartre to deduce that existence precedes essence when it comes to a human being or the *for-itself* of a human being. As a result, Sartre manages to establish that the *for-itself* is a project that is constantly being constructed. The freedom to make a choice to give the essence to one's existence is the main characteristic of the *for-itself*.

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A Double-blind, Peer-reviewed, Quarterly, Multidiciplinary and bilingual Research Journal

Impact Factor
SJIF (2022): 4.824

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Having considered the freedom to make a choice as an important aspect for the development of an individual's *self*, we will now focus on how this freedom might be ontologically dangerous. This freedom is threatened by the very fact of coexistence. It would be useful to take into account that no being exists in isolation. Existence means one's existence with others in society. Sartre identifies a dangerous situation here. He tells us about the meeting of two human beings. He explains that the *for-itself* is reduced to the *in-itself* in the gaze of others. It remains there only as an object. Yet it confirms its status of being the *for-itself*. There is therefore a conflict on two levels: the first is between the *in-itself* and the *for-itself*. The situation gets worse when the *for-itself* of two individuals comes into conflict. Each will take the other *for* herself/himself. The relationship between two individuals is therefore sadomasochistic in Sartre. The artistic manifestation of this philosophical idea is found explicitly in Sartre's play *No-Exit*. This sadomasochistic relationship allows Sartre to remark that "Hell is other people". According to Sartre, in this encounter, one has access to the presence of others, but the great obstacle is the inaccessibility to the consciousness of others. In the encounter of the two beings, they know that are confronted with a type of 'object' that is very different from the one defined earlier (for example, the letter opener). Here, the awareness that an 'object' is looking back at 'me' makes a big difference.

Others, as *for-itself*, are free to give meaning to the actions of the *self*. This gaze of others towards the *self* makes one aware of the fact that the *self* remains no more than an object in that very gaze. Therefore, *self* becomes "*for others*" reduced from "*for-itself*". It is determined solely by others. Sartre explains this phenomenon using the example of a voyeur. Driven by curiosity or jealousy, if a voyeur tries to look into a room through the keyhole, he exists at that moment as *for-itself*. Thus, he is free to make sense of the situation before him. He is free to interpret the situation as he wishes. In this case, the status of actions in the bedroom is reduced to an object that is interpreted by the voyeur.

In the same case, imagine that this voyeur hears the sound of footsteps. He becomes aware that someone is watching him. Thus, now, its status is reduced from *for-itself* to *in-itself*. He becomes the object of someone else's gaze. His actions are interpreted by this other. The latter has the freedom to pass judgment on this voyeur. Here, it is interesting to note that Sartre explains that this other is not necessarily defined by his physical presence. Sartre explains that it is experience that allows the *self* to perceive the presence of the other. In this way, even the sound of footsteps could be considered as the other. Thus the consciousness of being present others' gaze is enough to give the sentiment of being reduced to object.

This is how the Sartrean philosophy leads to the conclusion that the existence of others is an obstacle to this freedom. The others develop a knowledge about 'me' as the *in-itself* to which there is no access. 'Me', as *for-itself*, aspires to free 'myself' from this alienation caused by others. Conversely, the others yearn to free themselves from 'me'.

We do not limit Sartrean philosophy to the concepts of the *in-itself*, the *for-itself* and the *for-others*. However, we believe that these three concepts would suffice for this article which aims to study the Sai Paranjape's philosophical and artistic engagement with the philosophy of Sartre.

Refusal of Sartrean conclusion

Having studied Sartrean concepts and having said that he demonstrates these concepts in his literary work *No-Exit*, we will now focus on the adaptation of this work in Marathi society.

"Is hell always necessarily other people?"[8], asks Sai Paranjape, the playwright of the Marathi play. In the preface to the Marathi play, Paranjape explicitly tells us that she was inspired by Sartre's play and she wrote a Marathi play called *Aalbel* (2015). In the following part, we will analyze the Marathi play to justify our argument about the play.

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**Impact Factor
SJIF (2022): 4.824**

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First, let's summarize this play. Subsequently, we will compare the situation shown in this play to that in the French one. Quite simply, we will identify the similarities and/or differences in the two plays based on the artistic representation. Next, we will analyze the characters in this play using Sartrean philosophy. Finally, we will develop a conclusion to see if the author of the Marathi play really manages to deny all of Sartre's philosophy or she remains rather at the superficial level concerning her engagement to the French work.

As far as the story of this play is concerned, it is about three characters - Bhairav, Sada and Bappa - who are imprisoned for killing someone in their life. We can see that these characters are quite different from each other. The three have a different social status. Their principles, language, culture, attitude towards life, everything is different. However, we see that since they have to coexist in this cell, they develop a bond with each other. Sometimes we see them helping each other pass the time. For example, the character of Sada does physical exercises while the character of Bappa tells stories to pass the time. Thus, they try to make their life in the prison more bearable.

Now we will compare the two parts at the representation level. First, we see that even the titles of these two plays clash. The title *No-Exit* is self-explanatory. It means 'there is no exit' and this title has a rather negative meaning, whereas *Aalbel* means 'everything is fine' and has a positive meaning. Second, we find that, we have three main characters in Paranjape's play as we have in Sartre's play. However, we find that Sartre's characters cannot stand each other's presence whereas Paranjape's characters. Here we can see that these differences in the two plays do not exist because of the different life-worlds. Rather, these differences exist because of the different philosophies of the two playwrights.

We believe that character analysis will make the play even easier to understand. First of all, concerning the character of Bhairav, we find that he lives in bad faith, Sartrean concept. This could be justified by the fact that he changed his name on the pretext that it did not suit his profession. This is how he 'transforms' from Mukund Bhuse to Bhairav Bhuifod. This explains why he is in the process of defining himself in a social role. He does not accept who he is. So we can say that he is an inauthentic being, which is, according to Sartre, inevitable for a *for-itself*. Moreover, we find that he tries to make exist in his imagination what does not exist in reality. For example, he imagines himself on a cricket pitch. Thus, he does imaginary actions of throwing the ball to someone or hitting the ball using a stick. He is thus in the process of disappointing himself. Which reinforces the fact that he lives in bad faith.

As far as the character of Bappa is concerned, we find that at first he doesn't reveal the real murder story. This is because he does not want others to pass judgment on his actions. This lie makes him an inauthentic person, another Sartrean concept. In addition, we can see that he himself takes responsibility for what he did not do. Even if this situation, for the Marathi author, is very moralistic, we find that according to the Sartrean philosophy, Bappa tries to attribute the characteristics of being inferior or of being incapable to Saguna who is his blind daughter and who actually committed the murder. Here, Bappa tries to define a *for-itself* which makes him an inauthentic being.

Apart from these examples, we see other instances where Sartrean philosophy is justified rather than denied. First, the story of Jesus and Judas told by Bappa brings us back to the Sartrean idea that the human being is a transcendent being. This idea is also represented by the character of Bhairav who was an innocent child but became a criminal over time. Then we find that each of these characters are in the prison because of someone else. In other words, they are deprived of their liberty because of others. This justifies Sartre's conclusion – Hell is other people.

Conclusion

We can say that Sartre's characters represent a manifestation of both Sartre's art and philosophy. On the contrary, it seems to us that the characters of Paranjape only represent art. We cannot deny

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Impact Factor
SJIF (2022): 4.824

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Paranjape's contribution to art but her engagement with philosophy seems limited. She claims to be influenced by Sartre and so we find that this is an adaptation by refutation. But here it seems to us that it is not really a refutation of the Sartrean philosophy; it is rather the refutation of the conclusion drawn by Sartre. So, it seems to us that the Marathi author remains at the superficial level and therefore it is a case of the artistic – and not philosophical – engagement with the French work. This justifies part of our hypothesis. So, finally, we can say that the Marathi author manipulated the French work so that she could adapt it to her 'philosophical' concept which is "Paradise is other people!"

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SJIF (2022): 4.824

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