



## Existentialist Physicality in Select Marathi Short Stories

Sachin Shridhar Sukhadeve, (Ph.D.), Department of Foreign Languages,  
Savitribai Phule Pune University, Pune, Maharashtra, INDIA

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### Corresponding Author

Sachin Shridhar Sukhadeve, (Ph.D.),  
Department of Foreign Languages,  
Savitribai Phule Pune University,  
Pune, Maharashtra, INDIA

shodhsamagam1@gmail.com

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Existentialist physicality in select Marathi short stories Dr. Sachin Shridhar Sukhadeve  
Department of Foreign Languages Savitribai Phule Pune University, Pune. Abstract  
European literary works and ideas are often received in the world literature. Authors  
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no exception. The present paper aims to analyse the engagement of select Marathi  
short story writers with the theme of existentialist physicality.

### ABSTRACT

European literary works and ideas are often received in the world literature. Authors tend to incorporate these ideas and themes in their literary works. Marathi literature is no exception. The present paper aims to analyse the engagement of select Marathi short story writers with the theme of existentialist physicality. It analyses select short stories by Gandaghar Gadgil, D. P. Chitre and G. A. Kulkarni. Given the inexhaustive nature of the paper, it does not claim to have accommodated all the writers who deal with the theme in question. I will argue in the paper that the artistic engagement of Marathi short story writers weighs on their philosophical engagement with the philosophy in question.

### KEY WORDS

Existentialism, Marathi Short Story,  
Reception, Existentialist Physicality.

### INTRODUCTION

Reception and engagement with European literary works are often noticed in world literature. Marathi literature is no exception. In this paper I propose to study and evaluate the engagement of Marathi short story writers during the period 1945-75 with the philosophy of existentialism. The genre of short story witnessed a period of transition during 1935-45. Earlier the stories were marked by social idealism and patriotism as can be noticed in the stories of Hari Narayan Apte.<sup>1</sup> Repetitive themes made the genre monotonous. In addition, the destruction caused by the Second World War, even though India did not suffer at extent, made the authors feel the loss of hope and faith. These can be seen as driving forces behind the fall of the genre. Nevertheless, the genre of short story

attracted many new writers from 1945. Periodicals like 'Abhiruchi', 'Satyakatha', 'Chhand' and 'Sahitya' introduced a device of competition of short stories in order to efface the vacuum created by the monotony in the genre. It gave birth to a new genre of short story called 'Navkatha'. The mentioned periodicals nourished this genre. Although its seeds can be located in the stories of Vamanrao Ghorpade and Kusumavati Deshpande the genre reached its summit with the stories of authors like G. A. Kulkarni, Gangadhar Gadgil, P. N. Bhave, Arvind Gokhale, Dilip Chitre, Vyankatesh Madgulkar, C. T. Khanolkar, A. V. Joshi, Tara Vanarase, Sharacchandra Chirmule, Kamal Desai and Vijaya Rajyadhyaksha to name few of them.

The genre of 'Navakatha', contrary to the traditional background, put emphasis of the "here and now" characteristics of the plot of stories. The traditional form of "beginning, middle and the end" were abandoned and the writers started to follow the 'consciousness' of their characters. The genre was set to express the inner conflict of the human beings and consequently the existentialist themes were welcomed by the writers. Their works are marked by the physicality, consciousness about death, enthusiasm for life, anguish and absurdity. However, during the beginning this genre largely imitates European works as remarks Bhole Bhaskar Laxman. He says:

*There even arose a feeble output of existentialist short stories that were based on just a wrong-headed understanding of modernism. Writers of this trend composed their stories around a nucleus of ideas of the meaninglessness of human existence, its uprootedness, aimlessness, its cruelty or horror, its irrationality and so on. But barring few exceptions, one cannot say that Marathi writers were really up to this challenge. This may have happened because most writing of this type was based on imitation rather than actual experience.<sup>2</sup>*

The 'few exceptions' Bhaskar is speaking about seem arguably to be those of Gangadhar Gadgil, G. A. Kulkarni, D. P. Chitre, Kamal Desai and Vijaya Rajyadhyaksha. However, it is noticed that the short stories of the mentioned authors do not deal with the philosophy in its totality. It can be remarked that their stories present existentialist themes in isolated manner. Nonetheless, these authors engage with existentialist themes much more explicitly and evidently. It would be difficult to affiliate a particular author with a particular existentialist theme. The works are marked by different isolated themes although being in the domain of existentialism. This poses a difficulty in dividing the analysis author-wise. It would be much more relevant and coherent to divide the analysis thematically and study how different authors treat the theme in question. This article attempts to discuss the theme of physicality in the select short stories. I propose to evaluate thematically the philosophical and artistic engagement of Marathi authors with the existentialist theme in question. It also aims to study the binding of author to themes and not to the philosophy *per se*. It would be relevant here to precise that the citation taken from Marathi short stories are given as approximate translations with an effort to maintain maximal proximity with the original works. This is done with the objective of assuring continuity in reading the present article.

## Methodology

The select Marathi texts will be seen in the framework of European existentialist texts, especially Jean Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Will to Power* and Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*. It has been observed that Marathi texts simulate or derive their inspiration from European fictional existentialist texts rather than the philosophy *per se*. Therefore, the limitation of the Marathi texts in relation to existentialist philosophy will be studied with a theoretical background provided in *The Dialogic Imagination* (Mikhail Bakhtin).

Ante-narratives of European works are to be identified in selected Marathi works with the aim of investigating an intertextual relation between the two. In other words, a typology of select Marathi textual utterances will be established and their origins will be investigated outside them. Consequently,

these texts will not be seen as 'existing' but 'co-existing' in relation to others and thus trans-linguistic as suggested by Julia Kristeva in *Desire in Language: a semiotic approach to Literature and Art*. This thesis proposes to follow the methodology suggested by Kristeva. Thus, the investigation of intertextual function will be defined according to *Te* (Extra-novelistic textual set) found within *Tn* (Novelistic textual set). In this work, European existentialist texts will be treated as *Te* and those in Marathi will be treated as *Tn*.

## **Marathi writers' engagement with Existentialism**

Existentialist authors respond to the physical sensibility of their characters. They present their characters without the mask of social construct. On the one hand this approach makes the characters 'authentic', on the other the characters become 'the outsiders' to the society. The stimulation by physical sensibility and consequently the need of satisfying it can often be noticed in the short stories of A. V. Joshi. The stories like *Poor*, *Nakore Krushna Rang Taku*, *Namaste Gopalrao Guru* and *Maydi* would serve as an example of this approach. Some stories of G. A. Kulkarni and Tara Vanarase are equally marked by this approach. The 'ideal love' is replaced by 'physical need' in these stories. "Love was no more platonic, but became physical and carnal. Sex was recognised as a necessity of existence"<sup>3</sup>, says the critic Mahadeo Apte. Gangadhar Gadgil appears to be a precursor of this theme in the genre of short stories. He sees the 'self' of human being as indispensable from the physicality.

Gadgil presents an inner conflict of his character, Yamuna in his short story *Balatkar*. Yamuna, twenty-seven years old lady never allows men to touch her. She claims to know very well 'the race' of men. They (The men) know nothing but to seduce women according to her. She often reads news of sexual assault in the newspapers. She trembles by the thought of being touched or even of being seen by men. Her social conditioning doesn't allow her to accept her physical desires and her disgust towards men doesn't allow her to get married. Besides, her friend doesn't remain worthy of her friendship because the latter one prepares herself for marriage and touches a photo of her future spouse. In all, Yamuna convinces herself that she dislikes men and suppresses her natural desires by masking her 'authentic' or 'profound' self.

Yamuna's 'authentic' self is revealed by the arrival of an unknown guest at her place. She is unable to sleep during night despite the guest sleeping outside in the balcony. She has fear of getting sexually assaulted by the guest. She keeps on imagining in a repetitive way about her imaginary assault. However, she feels restless by the assault not happening and wishes it to happen as soon as possible so as to get rid off that thought. Gadgil narrates her condition precisely in the least words possible:

*Now it was impossible for her to stay calm. She was confused and getting insane. She was praying nothing but to let it happen, whatsoever, as soon as possible. At last, not being able to tolerate it, she got up and went near the door of the balcony. She looked outside with a trembling heart. And she became sad. He was sleeping calmly – very calmly.*<sup>4</sup>

Yamuna's approach gives the readers impression that she wishes a sexual relation and at the same time wants her guest to take the initiative. This shows that she doesn't stay honest to her own emotions and hide them for the fear of crossing the sociocultural barriers. Nevertheless, her natural instincts are awakened by the view of 'hairy and strong thighs' of the guest which made her consent for the desired act. "But Yamuna did not oppose, nor did she complain. Smiling sadly, she said, "I am ready". She said nothing more and then she fell unconscious."<sup>5</sup>

Gadgil touches chiefly two existentialist themes in this short story; authenticity and physicality. On the one hand, Yamuna seems to submit herself to her guest in imagination, on the other, her act can be seen as her submission to her own physical desires. In other words, she fails in following her socio-cultural conditioning *vis-a-vis* the needs of her physical 'self'. In this way, Gadgil shows the vigour of

‘authentic self’ as opposed to the ‘inauthenticity’ of the social conditioning. Yamuna’s submission to her ‘self’ makes her honest to herself. The guest plays nothing but a role of catalyst in Yamuna’s quest of the ‘self’ or in her transition from ‘inauthentic’ character to the ‘authentic’ one. Her sufferings, born from the conflict between thoughts of sexual assault and her repressed sexual desires, have their roots indeed in the conflict between the sociocultural barriers and her ‘authentic self’. She is torn between the two. In these circumstances, sexual assault would satisfy the two opposing forces in question; her physical desire and unwillingness to cross her social conditioning. The absence of the assault helps in the revelation and acknowledgement of her ‘self’ which otherwise, if the assault would happen, would make Yamuna no less than a victim of circumstances.

Gadgil’s story seem to have been inspired by Sartre’s example of the inauthentic lady at Stekel’s place while he explains the concept of ‘bad faith’ (*Mauvaise foi*) in his seminal *L’Etre et le Neant*<sup>6</sup> (Trans. *Being and Nothingness*). The conceptual proximity between Gadgil’s story and Sartre’s example is striking. Sartre’s story serves as an ante-narrative or extra-novelistic text (*Te*) whose echoes can be found on alien territory of Gadgil’s story which is novelistic text (*Tn*). This existentialist thread of the importance of physical sensibility is followed by other short story writers in Marathi Literature. D. P. Chitre perfects this genre by engaging in the philosophy.

D. P. Chitre highlights the theme of existentialist physicality through the narrative content of sexual urges. His characters seem to be far away from the morality and societal norms. Chitre’s approach proved to be revolutionary during the then Marathi society. It made the then Marathi society furious, remarks critic Sachin Kelkar.<sup>7</sup> We witness Chitre’s philosophy in his short story *Scorpio* published in his short story collection *Orpheus*. He equally gives shades of absurdity of life in his story. He presents us two characters, the narrator and Nargis. The description of Nargis’ home reveals to us that she belongs to a well-to-do parsi family. However, no one seems to be happy in the family. Her elder brother Gustad is retarded, father never utters a word and the mother never leaves house. The consciousness about physicality is dealt with at two different level; first about Gustad and second being between the narrator and Nargis. Gustad has a sexual desire towards his sister. The author attributes Gustad’s sexual urge with natural instinct as he (Gustad) doesn’t know the social value of his relation with his sister. The absence of thinking faculty, as he is retarded, brings into question the concept of morality as opposed to natural instinct. The existentialists take sexual desires as natural instinct and they are against the social construct which goes against the fundamental nature of human being. Chitre approaches this existentialist theme with the help of his character Gustad. On the contrary, the question of social construct and morality appears in the character of Nargis. She is unable to cross its frontiers. However, she is conscious that the social construct is the root cause of her ‘race’s’ decline.

*We cannot overcome this obstacle of lineage, religion and society. We feel unsafe. We live isolated, we are getting destroyed. We can’t quit our culture. There remains a gulf even if we marry someone other. This culture has made us outsiders since childhood. We cannot quit it.*<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, a strong sexual desire can be remarked in her character which she satisfies with the help of narrator. Their engagement in sexual act is purely physical and mechanical with no place for emotions or thoughts. “It happened four times. Completely corporal. [...] We didn’t allow words, thoughts and emotions to touch it.”<sup>9</sup> Chitre seems to suggest that the concept of morality comes from thoughts and emotions. The acts of the narrator, Nargis and Gustad do not seem to be immoral because the consciousness about morality is far from being coming in their conscience *vis-a-vis* the urgency of confirming their ‘self’ through physical existence. At an extent their acts can be said to be ‘amoral’ but not immoral. However, the consciousness about the morality of their act comes to the narrator well after the execution of the natural instinct. Chitre grants importance to the physical sensibility in opposition to any acquired culture. His characters, in Nietzschean<sup>10</sup> manner, are more in the quest of

'self' through their bodily experiences than through their culture. Thus Nietzsche's 'ideologeme' (*Te*), to use Kristeva's term, finds its traces in Chitre's story (*Tn*). The Marathi writer creates Nietzschean ideological descendant in his story. The consciousness about the physical existence of the 'self' is much more explicitly highlighted in another story *Kesal Kalebhor Pillu*.

*Kesal Kalebhor Pillu* introduces a character named Jamkhedkar. His grandfather's illness seems to be his first encounter with human sufferings. The cremation of his grandfather's corpse augments his consciousness about his own body and teaches him the perishable character of human body. This lesson prompts him of satisfying urgently what human body needs without carrying 'social' masks. His 'profound me' or 'authentic self' overcomes his 'social me'. Consequently, immediately after the funeral he eats his fill without much thinking about the reactions from the members of society. The awareness about the ephemeral character of human body makes Jamkhedkar get engaged in the sexual act with the secretary of his boss. This shows a striking contrast with his own past when he used to always satisfy his sexual needs by masturbating and dreaming about sexual acts. His physical engagement in the sexual act with the secretary, Mrs. Rane, appears to him a confirmation of his existence. This approach of Chitre appears to be very existentialist and makes his philosophy closer to the one of Nietzsche. He (Nietzsche) tries to confirm his existence as his ears get sensible about music and its need is felt in a repetitive manner. The quest and confirmation of existence through human body is a common theme in existentialist works. This theme, as discussed earlier, finds its archetype in the European existentialist works. It seems to have been adapted to Marathi society during the period of the *Navkatha* genre which appeared in the above-mentioned periodicals. Chitre makes his characters respond to the corporal desires in the form of sexual acts. Social existence and professional status become secondary against the confirmation of physical existence in Chitre's stories. "My birth, as of others, did not take place with my permission. But now since it happened, all my struggle is there for liberating my existence and making it pleasurable.", says Chitre.<sup>11</sup> He portrays characters taking pleasure of existence through their physicality. Chitre, in the discussed short story, seems to isolate an existentialist theme and responds to them and not to the totality of existentialist philosophy *per se*. However, his engagement with the isolated themes cannot be ignored.

This article would be incomplete without mentioning G. A. Kulkarni for his short stories and his engagement with existentialism. The theme dealt with in this article can be noticed in many stories of G. A. Kulkarni. However, it would be relevant to discuss his short story *Vastra* given the proximity it maintains with the theme in question.

G. A. Kulkarni's *Vastra* deals with the existentialist theme of physicality amongst others. It equally demonstrates absurdity of life. The protagonist D'souza is a nurse without formal qualification. She learns nursing by continual training. The author-narrator depicts the sufferings of the patients and their struggle for the life, which reminds us of Camus' Sisyphus. Camus highlights the importance of life and deals with the philosophical question of suicide to which he attributes utmost importance. His philosophy suggests to living happily the unreasonable life without falling in any kind of decadence, as does his mythological figure, Sisyphus. The patients in G. A. Kulkarni's story accept their life as it is and search happiness all the time in their misfortune. Their search for 'breathing-space'<sup>12</sup> suffices to attribute meaning to their life, to use Camus' ideologeme. The protagonist D'souza lives a mechanical life and she convinces herself to be happy with her work of taking care of the patients. Indeed, she personifies her work. She gives the readers an impression of not having any distinction between her 'social self' and 'authentic' or 'profound self'. Consequently, there is absence of consciousness about the absurdity of life. However, the author, from time to time, evokes the 'profound self' of the protagonist so much so that at the end her 'social self' is completely effaced. D'souza finally learns about the mechanical nature and absurd characteristic of her professional and social life. The author uses an

instrument of sensual song through another character, Mohini, to evoke consciousness about physicality in his protagonist. The song plays a role of catalyst in making D'souza conscious of her own body and her physical existence. The narrator tells us,

*The song she sang was very sensual, was filled with sexual desire. Mohini laughed as Miss. D'souza looked shocked; but Miss. D'souza had gone almost mad with her body burning with desire. She couldn't sleep for the whole night".<sup>13</sup>*

G. A. Kulkarni evokes D'souza's natural instinct to make her conscious of the absurdity of life. He does so in a repetitive manner. Another example would be the scene between her and Pinto, another character in the story. Pinto comes from her village et tries a sexual assault to D'souza when she loses her job. She succeeds in resisting but is not able to prevent her own body burning of desire. "As soon as he touches her, she felt like being melted and devoid of any strength. Although she had hatred in her mind her body was burning and the words of Mohini's song became burning fishes dancing on her body."<sup>14</sup> The confrontation of her social existence and physical existence is brought under scrutiny by the author. An obliteration of her 'social self' can be noticed towards the end of the story. The contrast between the social existence and physical existence is emphasised by the dialogues of her patients who all make fun of her despite all being women. She is respected by her patients but only as a nurse and not at all as a woman. This allows to deduce that her 'social self' has worth but her 'profound self' is worth nothing in the eyes of the others which otherwise is reduced to her corporal entity.

## CONCLUSION

This article attempted to examine the existentialist theme of physicality in the select Marathi short stories. It does not claim to be exhaustive study as the theme in question can be found in other the short stories of other authors. The theme continued to appear in the decade of eighty as well. Stories of Gauri Deshpande in her collection *Ahe he asa ahe* (1986) would be appropriate examples. She explores the theme of amorality (and not immorality) *vis-à-vis* physicality in her works. It is noticed that the present authors fictionalise the existentialist theme in question. Their artistic engagement weighs much on their philosophical engagement with existentialism. In other words, the artistic demonstration of the totality of the philosophy is obliterated from their works. The semiotic recoding of the European existentialist characters makes the characters more or less descendants of their European archetypes. These European archetypes are treated as 'extra-novelistic texts' (*Te*) which find their existence after being processed in Marathi 'novelistic texts' (*Tn*). Nevertheless, at this point, it would be relevant to contemplate on the sufficiency of the artistic genre of short story to demonstrate totality of philosophy. It would also be relevant to say that the genre of short story gives itself the objective of producing a single effect on the readers. In this concern the critic William Warde notices that Edgar Allan Poe formulates the structure of short story in a convincing manner in his review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*. He cites Poe :

*A skilful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents – he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing the preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tends not to be outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. And by such means, such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplated it with a kindled art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction.<sup>15</sup>*

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## Footnotes

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