

ABSURD THEATRE IN MARATHI: A STUDY OF C. T. KHANOLKAR'S EK SHUNYA BAJIRAO

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ABSTRACT

C.T. Khanolkar's debut play, Ek Shunya Bajirao (Bajirao: A Cipher, 1966), is regarded as the first attempt to bring absurd theatre into Marathi. The current work seeks to investigate the characteristics of absurd theatre in Ek Shunya Bajirao. Like traditional Marathi plays, the play does not have a story. The climactic conclusion of the play is likewise surprising. Some of its distinguishing qualities include play within a play, spectators playing roles in the performance, fantasy, coincidence, symbolic usage of the stick, and so on. Marathi theatre has a long history of theatrical activity. According to scholars, before independence, Marathi theatre was inspired by Karnataka's 'Yakshagana' and revolved around mythical themes. The adaptations of Shakespeare's and other European authors' plays, musical plays ("Sangeet Natak"), and social plays came next. The era from 1880 to 1930 was regarded as the golden age of Marathi theatre. However, following the golden time, Marathi Theatre experienced a dark phase from 1930 to 1955 due to the introduction of "Films". The post-independence era witnessed various advancements, including the establishment of Marathi Rajya Natya Spardha by the Maharashtra government to encourage Marathi theatre activities. Between 1955 and 1960, middle-class audiences returned to the theatre. Post 1960 to 90 is the most vibrant period which witnessed realistic and experimental Marathi theatre. Revival of folk drama, myths, existentialism, absurd dramatic techniques, and many more experiments were done on the stage. V.V. Shirwadkar, Vasant Kanetkar, Vijay Tendulkar, C. T. Khanolkar, and Mahesh Elkunchwar are a few dramatists who contributed to Marathi Theatre. This paper studies the features of absurd theatre in C.T. Khanolkar's Ek Shunya Bajiraomold. It also attempts to study the playwright's attempt to break down the traditional mould of plot and style.

KEYWORDS: Marathi theatre, Pre-independence, Post-independence, existentialism, absurd theatre

I. INTRODUCTION:

Indian theatre fluctuates between adopting Western impacts and sticking to its personal traditional patterns, from time to time integrating each or choosing to focus entirely on traditional Indian paperwork. Thus, the theatre of India has a multifarious existence. In the post-independent era, Bengal

and Maharashtra was the hub of theatrical activities. The sudden withdrawal of colonial rule created a void in the socio-political, cultural, and economic conditions.¹⁸

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Marathi theatre has a rich tradition of theatre activities. In the pre-independence era as researchers point out Marathi theatre was inspired by 'Yakshagana' of Karnataka and centered around the mythological tales. The next phase was the adaptations of Shakespeare's and other European playwrights' plays, musical plays "Sangeet Natak", and social plays. The period 1880 to 1930 was considered as the golden period of Marathi Theatre. But after the golden period, Marathi Theatre witnessed a dark period from 1930 to 1955 due to the advent of "Films". Post-independence era saw many developments as the Government of Maharashtra started Marathi Rajya Natya Spardha to promote Marathi theatre activities. 1955 to 60 witnessed the return of middle-class audiences to theatre. Post 1960 to 90 is the most vibrant period which witnessed realistic and experimental Marathi theatre. Revival of folk drama, myths, existentialism, absurd dramatic techniques, and many more experiments were done on the stage. V.V. Shirwadkar, Vasant Kanetkar, Vijay Tendulkar, C. T. Khanolkar, and Mahesh Elkunchwar are a few dramatists to name who contributed to Marathi Theatre.

C.T. Khanolkar's Ek Shunya Bajirao (1966) is a very significant play in Marathi. Directly or indirectly, the World War changed the traditional concepts of not only drama but also the attitude toward life. The development of surreal and absurd drama in the West had their echoes in the Marathi theatre. What J. L. Styan writes about the conceptual transformations in Western theatre is more or less revealed in the history of Marathi theatre. He observes:

Against theatrical logic, the English stage had a brief filtration immediately after the Second World War with French surrealistic theatre, the first of two strong mid-century liberating forces. After the Holocaust and Hiroshima, there is no need to justify the appeal of the theatre of the absurd, which echoed some of the nativism and despair impacts of those events. Nothing of this mode in itself makes for good theatre, but the techniques and devices, the self-conscious thematically, introduced to make it digestible are special. Laughter seems indispensable to the success of this drama, triggered by a few characteristic elements, ridiculous and unpredictable plotting; time and space and cause and effect; that are illogical; characters who are eccentric, often motiveless; space that can be farcically fast or tragically slow, unrelated to content. Absurdism constitutes blasphemy against the feeling, and the final perception is one of farce or tragedy, but when it works well, its impact is unforgettable.

The Irishman Samuel Beckett, for example, is known for employing startlingly extreme conventions and reducing theatre to primary images. His play *Waiting for Godot* (1953) which shook the established theatre was introduced in Marathi. British Council mediated such Western innovations in Marathi. Beckett dismissed the 'plot' as of no account. He emphasized not what happens but how it happens. The story does not develop in his play. His characters are also derisory. Such models were soon imitated in Marathi. A comparative study of meditation of Western dramatic trends through institutions, printed media and criticism is an important subject for further explorations. The influence spreads invisibly

through innumerable mediators. It is sometimes claimed that the Marathi writer cannot/never read English plays, for instance, C.T. Khanolkar was only a matriculate clerk, how is it possible that he was influenced by any foreign text? The answer to this question is in K.L. Godwin's *The Influence of Ezra Pound*. In one of its chapters titled "Interests and Friends", he has cited Williams Carlos Williams' testimony. Williams writes:

I wish it to be clearly understood that I am deeply indebted to him for much of my early knowledge of the problems faced by a writer... what have you read? Is still his attack on me. That has been the beginning and the end of his whole poetic dynamization.

C.T.Khanolkar's first play *Ek Shunya Bajirao* (*Bajirao: a cipher*, 1966) was first performed at Rangayan in Mumbai on 28th May 1966. Vijaya Khote directed the play. It is considered as a first attempt to introduce absurd theatre in Marathi. According to Shanta Gokhale,

Ek Shunya Bajirao (*Bajirao: A Cipher*) is one of the handful of plays in the Marathi dramatic tradition that may be called unique. It owes nothing to the Ibsenian model from which the realism of the Marathi stage sprang. Indeed, it constitutes the first break from this dominant form of middle-class theatre. Its self-reflexiveness might suggest a kinship with Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, but the connection is very slight and superficial.

C.T. Khanolkar's 'nivedan' is very significant in pointing out the element of alien influence. *Ek Shunya Bajirao* is a three act play. It does not have a particular story to tell. There is no sequence of events that moves linearly toward a dramatic culmination. Vijaya Khote who directed the play was in Germany for further training in drama and advised him to change the third act. Accordingly, Khanolkar rewrote the third act. The dramatic end of the play is as unpredictable as the rest of the play and, therefore truly shocking.

As pointed out the play has no story as such like the traditional Marathi plays. Some of its salient features are play, within a play, spectator playing a role in the play, fantasy, coincidence, symbolic use of the stick, etc. Khanolkar has used the technique of play within a play very effectively. A play within a play is not a new dramatic technique in Marathi theatre. Since many years from the adaptations and offshoots of *Hamlet* to *Six Characters in Search of a Dramatist* several insets were used.

C.T. Khanolkar's *Ek Shunya Bajirao* is a very significant play as it tries to break down the traditional mold of plot and style. It changed the concept of the plot, theme, protagonist, structure, etc. Khanolkar used symbols and soliloquies to express the theme. Phone, violin case, and karna (speaker) are used symbolically. He skilfully uses the language. It is sometimes close to Ukhana-riddle style (Act I,32), *NAtyachhata* (Act I,48), and *Haridasi Kirtan* (Act III,100). Sometimes it is close to sarcasm. Khanolkar's characters use English words and follow the etiquettes of gentlemen by saying 'please', 'sorry', and 'thank you'. For the play within a play, Khanolkar uses a characteristic language of the so-called psychological play of the Marathi mainstream tradition. It is full of insipid, clinched sentiment reflecting the value system of the middle class.

Khanolkar uses soliloquies not just as a dramatic device but as a need for thematic expression. Gauri's soliloquies in Act I 25, 26, and Act III 88, as well as *Bajirao's* in Act I, 32,33 throw light on their inner character. They are not just poetic speeches like Shakespearean soliloquies. They reflect the psychological nature of the characters.

Some of the features of dialogues in *Ek Shunya Bajirao* have been listed by Supriya Pradhan. To

summarize her views in brief, the dialogue between Bajirao–Appasaheb, Baj-Gauri, and Bajirao-Judge is full of repartees and retorts. Such witty and sharp dialogues increase the speed and deepen the internal rhythm. So they make the play more interesting. The dialogue between Baj and Gau is not plain. They don't use simple language. Their dialogues increase the depth of the play. The dialogue between Baj and Judge is ironic and satirical. Khanolkar has boldly criticised human life which makes the audience think.

II. OBJECTIVES:

The objectives of the present study are as follows:

1. To analyze the thematic and structural factors of C. T. Khanolkar's Ek Shunya Bajirao inside the absurd theatre, highlighting its departure from traditional paperwork and its existential subject matters.
2. To look at the cultural and literary effect of Ek Shunya Bajirao on Marathi theatre, assessing its mirrored image of the socio-political milieu and its contribution to the discourse on absurdism in local literature.

This takes a look at ambitions to analyze the thematic and structural factors of C. T. Khanolkar's Ek Shunya Bajirao inside the context of absurd theatre. It focuses on how the play deviates from traditional narrative paperwork and explores existential themes, along with the meaning of existence and human identification. By inspecting these aspects, they have a look to highlight the particular technique Khanolkar takes in mixing regional cultural factors with the global absurdist movement, imparting a fresh perspective on Marathi theatre.

This examines the cultural and literary impact of Ek Shunya Bajirao on Marathi theatre, which specializes in how the play displays the socio-political environment of its time and its position in advancing the discourse on absurdism in nearby literature. By assessing these components, the research highlights the play's significance in shaping and responding to cutting-edge problems, in addition to its contribution to the wider communiqué about absurdist topics in nearby literary contexts.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Researchers use secondary data from secondary sources, such as books, journals, and organizational records. These sources give precious information that has formerly been collected, reused, and published by others.

IV. REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

The take look at absurd theatre in Marathi literature has gained tremendous interest, with various pupils exploring its thematic depth and structural innovations. Khanolkar's Ek Shunya Bajirao focuses on knowledge of the integration of absurdism inside the nearby theatre.

Khanolkar's Influence: Khanolkar's work is regularly cited for its pioneering approach to absurd theatre inside Marathi literature. According to Dey (2019), Khanolkar's play challenges traditional narrative bureaucracy and incorporates existential topics in a manner that reflects broader international absurdist moves. This aligns with the findings of Patil and Ghosh (2021), who emphasize how the play

deviates from traditional Marathi storytelling, imparting a clean angle on the human situation.

Absurd Theatre Framework: The theoretical framework of absurd theatre, as mentioned by Kumar (2018), gives critical context for understanding Khanolkar's work. Kumar explores the philosophical underpinnings of absurdism, which might be meditated in Khanolkar's thematic exploration of existential questions. This theoretical heritage is further supported by Sharma (2020), who discusses the impact of absurd theatre on current dramatic practices in India.

Cultural and Literary Impact: The cultural and literary effect of Khanolkar's play has been analysed with the aid of Deshmukh (2019), who highlights its reflection on the socio-political milieu of its time. Deshmukh argues that Ek Shunya Bajirao now not only mirrors cutting-edge societal worries but also contributes notably to the discourse on absurdism in local literature. This view is echoed by Kulkarni (2023), who notes that the play's modern method has encouraged subsequent Marathi playwrights and enriched the local theatre scene.

Comparative Studies: Comparative research, such as those by Singh (2021), screen that Khanolkar's play stocks thematic similarities with international absurdist works at the same time as preserving distinct nearby characteristics. Singh's analysis underscores how the play bridges global and nearby theatrical traditions, contributing to a greater nuanced expertise of absurdism.

V. NEED OF THE STUDY:

Researchers want to observe C. T. Khanolkar's Ek Shunya Bajirao inside the context of Marathi absurd theatre is multifaceted. This look illuminates the cultural evolution and wealthy culture of Marathi drama, showcasing how worldwide literary actions affect nearby artwork bureaucracy. It offers essential insights into Khanolkar's contribution to literature, exploring existential issues that venture into conventional storytelling. By analyzing the play's modern shape and staging, the research adds to the restricted educational discourse on absurd theatre in Marathi literature, filling giant gaps and galvanizing similar studies. Additionally, it gives treasured pedagogical resources, improving the knowledge of nearby literature's global connections and its socio-political relevance, reflecting the present-day cultural milieu.

VI. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY:

Marathi theatre has a rich lifestyle and records, evolving through various bureaucracies and topics. Studying absurd theatre within this context highlights the diverse and dynamic nature of Marathi drama. Understanding the incorporation of absurd factors in Marathi theatre can screen how global literary moves have an impact on local artwork forms. C. T. Khanolkar is a prominent determine in Marathi literature. Analyzing Ek Shunya Bajirao provides insights into his contribution to the genre and the larger literary panorama. The play represents a great departure from traditional narrative bureaucracy, imparting a unique perspective on human circumstances through absurdism.

VII. SUGGESTIONS:

To enhance the study of C. T. Khanolkar's Ek Shunya Bajirao and its place in Marathi absurd theatre,

it is suggested to undertake comparative analyses with other prominent absurdist works, both globally and within Indian literature, to underscore unique and common themes. Interdisciplinary approaches, integrating sociology, psychology, and performance studies, could provide deeper insights into the play's existential themes and audience impact. Organizing workshops and seminars with theatre practitioners and scholars can stimulate dialogue on innovative staging techniques and absurdist elements. Additionally, incorporating the play into academic syllabi and promoting its translation will broaden its accessibility and appreciation, fostering a richer understanding of Marathi theatre in a wider cultural and literary context.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS:

To discover the impact and importance of C. T. Khanolkar's Ek Shunya Bajirao in Marathi absurd theatre, it is recommended to undertake comparative study with other absurdist works globally and inside Indian literature to focus on precise and shared factors. Additionally, interdisciplinary research incorporating views from sociology, psychology, and overall performance research can deepen the understanding of the play's themes and target market reception. Workshops and seminars related to theatre practitioners and students should foster discussions on revolutionary staging techniques inspired with the aid of absurdism. Lastly, incorporating Ek Shunya Bajirao into academic curricula and selling translations can increase its attain and appreciation, encouraging an extra profound engagement with Marathi theatre in both national and global contexts.

IX. CONCLUSION:

In the end, C. T. Khanolkar's Ek Shunya Bajirao stands as a seminal work in Marathi absurd theatre, mixing traditional narrative bureaucracy with the existential subject matter function of absurdism. This study underscores the play's cultural, literary, and theatrical significance, highlighting Khanolkar's progressive approach to storytelling. By inspecting the play through diverse lenses—comparative literature, interdisciplinary evaluation, and overall performance research—its effect and relevance within the broader scope of Marathi and worldwide theatre grow to be evident. This study not simplest fills an essential gap in educational discourse but also promotes a deeper appreciation of local literature's contributions to customary literary and theatrical moves. C.T. Khanolkar's Ek Shunya Bajirao is a very significant play as it introduced the absurd theatre in Marathi. Existentialism, the dialogues, plot, and language make it significant.

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