

# A Feministic Discourse of Existentialism in Namita Gokhale's Select Works

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## Abstract

Existentialism argues for people's way of life and rights. The structure of existentialism shows people's misery and action to achieve their aim and their obligations. Existentialist feminism talks for women to make them realise their existence. The ideas of existentialist feminism theory are compared with Namita Gokhale's selected texts *Priya: In Incredible Indyya* (2011), *The Book of Shadows* (1999), and *Things to Leave Behind* (2016). The concepts of existentialist feminism examined with Namita Gokhale's women characters of the selected texts to analyse their choice, existence, etc. The selected texts have the ideas of existentialist feminism. Existentialist feminism is explored through the attributions of the life of women characters in Namita Gokhale's selected texts *Priya: In Incredible Indyya* (2011), *The Book of Shadows* (1999), and *Things to Leave Behind* (2016). In Namita Gokhale's selected works, the leading characters are represented existentialism aspects are Priya, Rachita, and Tilottama. For this research, the researchers of chosen current study theorists are Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus. The methodology of this study adopts this theory to analyse the reflection of existentialist feminism in Namita Gokhale's selected texts. This study compares with the other studies related to existentialism feminism. Future study recommendations are psychoanalysis theory, alienation, feminism, and identity crisis.

**Keywords:** feministic discourse, existentialism, textual reading, emancipation, woman life

## 1. Introduction

Theories of feminism and existentialist feminism have different motifs for women's existence. To know about the meaning of existentialist feminism, Simone de Beauvoir is asking some questions. For women, Beauvoir asks the people, "what place they hold in this world, what place they should hold, where are the women?" (Beauvoir, 2009). She says that "Every person who is preoccupied with explaining his existence sees it as an unending yearning to transcend himself" (Beauvoir, 2009). Further, Beauvoir says, "men are the subject, while women are the objects. According to Beauvoir, existentialism occurs when a woman no longer sees herself as an object, but rather as a subject" (Beauvoir, 2009). From this above explanation, it is clear about existentialist feminism.

Namita Gokhale is a famous writer of women issues who focuses mainly on women issues and their circle of life. Among her favourite texts, this research selects three texts they are, *Priya: In Incredible Indyya* (2011), *The Book of Shadows* (1999), and *Things to Leave Behind* (2016). This study aims to justify the selected texts of Namita Gokhale with ideas of theorist theory. The first is to identify the meaning of the theory existentialist feminism and theorist's ideas. The second is to understand the women's problems in the selected texts. And the last is about analysing the problem and giving a solution to the problem from the existentialist feminism point of view.

There are many researches done on the theory of feminism and existentialism. But only a few studies are focused on the existentialist approach with the feminist point of view. Simone de Beauvoir is a famous theorist, and he says, "she finds and selects herself in a world where men urge her to portray herself as other: an attempt is made to fix her as an object and sentence her to immanence" (Beauvoir, 2009). He says that women do not have the freedom to choose their needs. Beauvoir's point of view is reflected in Namita Gokhale's work *The Book of Shadows*. The protagonist Rachita says, "Experience is the raw material of life. Life is the sum of meagre experiences. After a while,

it becomes easier just to drift. Yet anger can at least affirm, while regret redeems nothing” (Gokhale, 1999).

The rest of the study notes the reflection of existentialist feminism through literature review, methodology, discussion, and result. The literature review discusses the studies related to existentialist feminism theory reflection in novels. The methodology part gives ideas of existentialist feminism compared with the selected texts of Namita Gokhale. In the discussion part, the researchers of this study compare the other existentialist feminism studies with the current research. This discussion and methodology will give an idea to the researchers to conclude with findings and future recommendations.

## 2. Literature Review

This part gives the theoretical framework of other research, which contributes to existentialism in multiple ways. This part also demonstrates the uniqueness of this study. There are many issues regarding existentialism. But among the various researches, there is no study done with the theory of existentialism in Namita Gokhale’s work. The notable theorists of existentialism are Simone de Beauvoir, Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre. The literature is examined in the context of existentialism throughout this area.

Kohzadi and Azizmohammadi’s article discusses existentialism in the novel *The Caste* written by Franz Kafka. K is the central character of this novel. He observes the people who are living around him. Amalia is one of the essential characters who like to live her life as she wants, but her village customs force her to live with the castle. But she finds her own identity for her life. K compares his life with Amalia, but he cannot come out from the castle. Thus, existentialism reflects through the character Amalia (Kohzadi and Azizmohammadi, 2013).

Yusuf and Susilo’s study on the work *Cigarette Girl* novel is written by Ratih Kumala. The existentialism theory is applied to the main character through feminism. In the feminist movement, many researchers discuss that women are physically and mentally weak. But existentialism in feminism discusses the awareness of women about their identity to destroy the hierarchy that is harmful for woman’s position. The researcher is used Simone de Beauvoir’s existentialist feminism theory to analyse existentialism in feminism. Roemaisa is the main woman character, and she lost her husband. After her loss of a husband, she started her new life. But, society did not allow her to choose her life as her wish. Because there is a separate life for widowed women, Roemaisa breaks the rules, she becomes a strong character because women can work and become intellectuals and transcend its boundaries (Yusuf and Susilo, 2020).

The study of Yantiningsih’s research focuses on existentialism in *Sing Me to Sleep* written by Angela Morrison. This study illustrates an existential situation in which an individual tries hard to make her life meaningful by making existential choices. Also, it explains freedom to choose and suggests that what is good to an individual should also be good. There are many choices in everyone’s life, and everyone lives a different lifestyle. This study also expresses that individuals have the right to choose their best path for life (Yantiningsih, 2013).

The above studies are done with the feministic ideas of existentialism theory. There are only few types of research done with the feministic ideas and none of the research done with Namita Gokhale’s texts. This proves the uniqueness of the current research. Also, to know the deep understanding of existentialism theory, the researchers reviewed some studies that are examined with novels and movies.

The study of Wilhelm Snyman abbreviates existentialism through Henri Fauconnier’s notorious novel *The Soul of Malaya* (Malaysia). Existentialism reflects in the set of the colonial period of Malaya. In this autobiographical novel, the author says about the First World War. The colonial period and world war exaggerated the Malaya people’s culture and life. Fauconnier’s way of “Being in the World” means coming to grips with the unknowable and, in doing so, finding hope for fulfillment. He is unconcerned with the fact that his methods are unorthodox. The primary notion explored with existentialism is a life open to “Being in the World” (Snyman, 2015).

The study of Rinna affirms existentialism in work *The Old Man and The Sea* written by Ernest Hemingway. In the study, the researcher focuses on the old man, Santiago. The people who live with Santiago say that Santiago has no strength for fishing like he did at a young age. Santiago did not care about the people and the living in his way. The researcher explores existentialism through Santiago’s self-esteem. Existentialism reflects in three ways: aesthetical, ethical, and religious (Rinna, 2017).

The study of Rahmonkulova discusses dystopian existentialism in the novel *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding. According to this study, dystopian existentialism represents a human individual’s existence in a ruined society and the necessity of his taking specific responsibilities in this society. In this study, the existentialism focused on twelve-year-old Ralph is jubilant at the thought of being marooned in a place where no grown-ups can limit his freedom. And his freedom is always, and necessarily, limited. But Ralph set an identity for his life and did not expect

his improvements from other people (Rahmonkulova, 2019).

Jyoti Bora's article draws Soren Kierkegaard's existentialism theory in Albert Camus's *The Outsider*. The study aims to identify the attribution of existentialism in protagonist Mersault. This research analysis existentialism in social commentary on multiple social situations, including marriage, time, and society. The various stages of Mersault's life show the meaningless life. Mersault accepts life or death without looking for a more profound significance. At last, Mersault realises his value of life and considers his true life (Bora, 2020).

Huang's study discusses existentialism through the novel *Fortress Besieged* written by Qian Zhongshu. The protagonist, Fang Hongjian, returns from Europe after his studies. He returned from his hometown during the world war and observed the people's lifestyle. The people want to break the chain of struggle and escape. But at present, people are given crucial choices in life. Fang Hongjian breaks off his arranged engagement with Miss Zhou and marries Zhao Xinmei. He chooses his life as he likes. Also, he withdraws his weak protest when his father threatens to cut off financial support (Huang, 2018).

The study of Whipple and Tucker affirms existentialism in both film and novel. In this study, the researchers discuss existentialism from four applications. The four divisions are responsibility, freedom, existential isolation, meaninglessness, and death, which are associated with characters in the novel and film. The main character Josef from the novel *When Nietzsche Wept: A Novel of Obsession* pursues to quiet the worries of death, purposelessness, loneliness, and liberty by allowing life to "choose him." These concepts also reflect Joel's character in the movie *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Whipple and Tucker, 2012).

Ulfa's research is different from the above-discussed studies. Because this research affirms existentialism from the antagonist character in *How to Train Your Dragon 2* Movie. The antagonist character Drago Blutvist covered with existentialism's six characteristics, including humanity, contingency, subjectivity, conscious being in the world, faith, and anti-materialism. Drago Blutvist has different ideas for training the dragon. But the protagonist and the people oppose Drago Blutvist's views. But he has a strong belief in his thoughts, and in the end, he wins his life by living in his way (Ulfa, 2017).

From the literature review discussion, the researchers found only a few researches done with feminist existentialism. Mostly, the past studies are done with existentialism with novels and movies, but there is no research done with Namita Gokhale's texts. This encourages the current researcher to study Namita Gokhale's select texts with feministic ideas of existentialism.

### 3. Methodology

In feminist aspects of existentialism, Beauvoir says, "What I will try to describe is how a woman is taught to assume her condition, how she experiences this, what universe she finds herself enclosed in, and what escape mechanisms are permitted her" (Beauvoir, 2009). The women are forced into a particular condition in their life. Beauvoir says, "As they are brought up by women, in the heart of a feminine world, their normal destiny is marriage, which still subordinates them to a man from a practical point of view" (Beauvoir, 2009). Beauvoir's point of view is reflected in Namita Gokhale's text *Things to Leave Behind*. That the text tells, "As a young man, Nain Chand has been told by his much-married uncle, his bujiyu, that arranged marriage were like a game of dice. 'It is all in the hands of the omniscient ascetic Shiva. His marriage to Parvati Devi was the noblest union ever. I scored a zero twice and then a two'" (Gokhale, 2016). The text points out about destiny of marriage for women. The character Nain Chand marries multiple times that clearly emphasis the destiny and condition of marriage in women's life. Her family decides women's conditions and has no freedom to choose to lead their lives.

Further, Beauvoir says, "A man doesn't look at himself in the mirror ... A man doesn't cry" (Beauvoir, 2009). Emotions are a common expression to all human beings. Sometimes emotions are explicated by crying, laughing, and so on. With this, the researchers of this study can compare with Namita Gokhale's text, that the point explored in the text, "I concealed my job and gratification behind a mask of motherly concern, 'No beta, no tears, men don't cry!'" (Gokhale, 2011). This points out that women are weak as mentally. Women's life limited by a specific condition. Beauvoir says, "A woman is walled up in a kitchen or a boudoir, and one is astonished her view is restricted; her wings are plucked, and then she is scolded for not knowing how to fly. Let a future be available to her, and she will no longer be bound to settle in the present" (Beauvoir, 2009). Women who are facing problems will be getting a successful life. As the text *Things to Leave Behind* says that "The women retreated meekly into the kitchen. Only Tilottama dared lined on to listen" (Gokhale, 2016). Every woman is not asking their rights to lead a successful life. But only a few women are leading their successful life with facing many struggles. Beauvoir says that "She rarely feels a bold creativeness, and usually, she lacks the technique of self-expression; but in her conversation, her

letters, her literary essays, her sketches, she manifests an original sensitivity” (Beauvoir, 2009).

Tilottama also has some restrictions to overcome from the problems she wished to educate herself, and she faced people who disliked her decisions. Beauvoir points out that women are searching for freedom from an empty place. She has no place to attain her goal. Even she has no path to select her way to achieve (Beauvoir, 2009). Beauvoir’s point of view is reflected in Namita Gokhale’s work *The Book of Shadows*. The protagonist says that “My spirit was troubled; I was puzzled and perplexed by the nature of my duties and the burden...” (Gokhale, 1999). When Rachita is attacked by acid, she faces many problems like alienation, discrimination, avoidance, and so on. She struggled to find her path to achieve (Priyadarshini, Mohan, Hariharasudan, & Hassan, 2021).

Jean-Paul Sartre is a famous theorist of existentialism, whose ideas are used by many researchers in their research findings. He says, “I exist, that is all, and I find it nauseating” (Sartre, 1943). From this quotation, the theorist explores that he is uncomfortable in the existing place. And he feels sick in his present living place. Similarly, in Namita Gokhale’s work *The Book of Shadows*, the protagonist Rachita feels bad in her place. Because Rachita is the survivor of an acid assault, society pushes her to live alone in her home. So, Rachita feels nauseous when she’s among other people. That she says, “I myself am, in truth, nothing but a displaced force yet I deny that I am evil. Perhaps indeed there is no evil” (Gokhale, 1999). These words of Rachita reflect her hesitation in life.

Further, Sartre says that “I must be without remorse or regrets as I am without excuse; for, from the moment of my birth, I have carried the weight of the world alone and without assistance, engaged in a world for which I bear full responsibility without being able, no matter what I do, to tear myself away from it for an instant” (Sartre, 1943). This reflects through the character Rachita in the novel *The Book of Shadows*. She illuminated by living alone and carried her duty alone. She didn’t bother about society and started to overlook her and live life as she liked.

Sartre says, “Everything has been figured out, except how to live” (Sartre, 1943). Sartre says there is no rule for life. In every work, the people follow some routine, but people are just moving behind their lives in life. Like in Namita Gokhale’s work *Things to Leave Behind*, the protagonist Tilottama has no idea about her future. Tilottama says she “had little time for the child. She found her boring and suspected her of being dull” (Gokhale, 2016). There is no change in Tilottama’s marriage, baby birth, and daily routine. These revolution works are not the same all day. The above explanations are about Tilottama’s life, confirming that she represents the existentialism theory.

Beauvoir is an existentialist philosopher and famous in existentialist feminism and feminist theory. She tells about existentialism, “To be oneself, simply oneself, is so amazing and utterly unique an experience that it’s hard to convince oneself so singular a thing happens to everybody” (Beauvoir, 1963). She claims that being alone may be enjoyable. She continues to state that it is difficult for everyone to grasp. This point is reflected through the character Rachita in Namita Gokhale’s *The Book of Shadows*. Rachita says, “I was getting tired of human talk, it used too many words, and their hysteria sickened me. I reverted to another dimension, a dimension of peace, such immense empty solitude that sometimes it is difficult to penetrate” (Gokhale, 1999). As already know, Rachita is an acid victim who hates to face society with her acid attacked face. So she enjoys her life by being alone. She tastes her lonely life by reading, cooking, and so on (Priyadarshini, Mohan, Hariharasudan, & Hassan, 2021).

Beauvoir says, “There’s something inside me, something as strong as an iron rod that crushes my will and suppresses any flare of excitement or desire. I strip my heart bare, and have a soul as dark as any pitch. The notion that mine is not an unusual situation affords me little solace” (Beauvoir, 1963). She claims that being alone makes her powerful. This reflects in protagonist Priya of Namita Gokhale’s work *Priya: In Incredible Indiyaa*. Priya states that “I decided to play it silent: to watch, listen and observe. We all need a change,’ I repeated to myself, like a mantra. ‘We all need a change.’ It placed things in perspective (Gokhale, 2011). In Priya’s life, the various dimensions of catastrophes of her dreams makes her to be alone. At present, she is listening to her marriage life silently and alone. In every life, there is a change that crushes their total life. For Priya, marriage makes her change, but she hesitates to listen to others’ opinions.

Albert Camus is a famous theorist of existentialism theory. Many researchers utilised his ideas to bring existentialism ideas into their research. Albert Camus affirms that “Whatever we may do, the excess will always have its place in the heart of man, in the spot where isolation is discovered. We all have our places of exile, our sins, and our devastation inside us. But our goal is not to release them on the world; it is to combat them in ourselves and in others” (Camus, 1992). This idea is reflected through the protagonists of three selected works of Namita Gokhale. They are Priya in *Priya: In Incredible Indiyaa*, Tilottama in *Things to Leave Behind*, Rachita in *The Book of Shadows*. The middle-class woman Priya, gets married to the minister. So Priya struggles to live her life as she likes. She has twin sons, so she had more responsible in her life. After her marriage, she forgets the dreams of her future. She fights with herself that no one knows. Like that next protagonist, Tilottama fights for her rights like education, freedom, etc. At

the beginning of her marriage, her silence took her to loneliness. That makes Tilottama release about her life in a family chain. When she opposed her relatives, she realised that “her relatives were left speechless” “Tilottama had decided to educate herself” (Gokhale, 2016). Another protagonist in the work *The Book of Shadows* is Rachita. Her acid attack makes her alienated, and her self-esteem makes her strong. So Namita Gokhale’s selected works for this research have existentialism issues.

Also, Albert Camus says that there are no choices in life. Camus says that “love is not only the happiest matter, but it should make understandable. Because it is a lengthy and painful fight in the darkness for the realisation of definite” (Camus, 1992). As Rachita in *The Book of Shadows* says, “Life is constant series of choices. Some you make and some are inevitable made for you” (Gokhale, 1999). There is no gain without pain is more suitable in Rachita’s life. She understood the other side of all successful life.

#### 4. Discussion and Result

This part compares the result of this study with other studies. This makes the readers understand the current research about existentialism in reflecting Namita Gokhale’s selected texts. Mashhood Anjum et al.’s study reveals existentialist feminism in Toni Morrison’s *A Sula*. This study highlights the patriarchal life of women with the ideas of existentialist feminism. The current study examines how female entities battle throughout their existence in a male-dominated culture, either following or opposing established norms and set structures to gain societal acceptability or assert their sovereign individual selves (Mashhood Anjum et al., 2021). This is also reflected in Namita Gokhale’s text *Things to Leave Behind*. The protagonist Tilottama has the domination by her marriage life. She tackled everything to achieve her dream (Priyadarshini, Mohan, Hariharasudan, & Sangeetha, 2021).

In the same way, the domination of women reflects in the text *Priya: In Incredible Indyya*. ‘You know, Maa, I respect you for being a very normal sort of woman,’ he said. ‘It’s weird, but are you are extraordinary because you are so ordinary’” (Gokhale, 2011). Priya’s son likes his mother because his mother is normal, ordinary, and soft. This explores the mentality of men about women. The women are like by others when they are dominated people, obedient, silent, and so on.

Another study conducted existentialism theory in *Nausea* written by Jean-Paul Sartre and *The Immoralist* by Andre Gide. This study investigates the main characters Roquentin and Michel and their existence. These two characters have no motif for their life. Roquentin and Michel lead their life as their wish without giving attention to others commends (Wenanda, 2021). This reflects in Namita Gokhale’s text *Priya: In Incredible Indyya* that emphasises the character Priya. She leads her life without following others’ way. Instead, she makes her way to live her life.

Yantiningsih’s research focuses on the issue of existentialism in Angela Morrison’s novel *Sing Me to Sleep*. This research depicts an existential predicament in which a person attempts to make her life meaningful through existential choices. It further clarifies the concept of freedom of choice, implying that what is beneficial for one person should also be good for others. Everyone’s life is of options, and everyone lives differently. According to this study, individuals have the right to pick their greatest life path (Yantiningsih, 2013). Like in Namita Gokhale’s work *The Book of Shadows*, the protagonist Rachita leads her life as she likes. She decides that she needs to live a prosperous life. She had no intention of relying on anybody else after her acid assault because she realises that there was nothing in the world to believe except herself.

Another study of Yusuf and Susilo’s is one of the existentialist feminism. This theory is analysed with the protagonist’s characteristics of the novel *Cigarette Girl*. Existentialism in feminism discusses the awareness of women about their identity to destroy the hierarchy that is harmful for woman’s position. The researcher has used Simone de Beauvoir’s Existentialist feminism theory to analysis existentialism in feminism. Roemaisa is the main woman character, and she lost her husband. After the loss of her husband, she started her new life, but society did not allow her to choose her life as her wish (Pandeewari, Hariharasudan & Nawaz, 2021). Because there is a separate life for widowed women. But Roemaisa breaks the rules, and she becomes a strong character by women who can work, become intellectuals, and transcend its boundaries (Yusuf and Susilo, 2020). This reflects in Namita Gokhale’s selected work *Thing to Leave Behind*. In work, protagonist Rachita loses her husband, and then she is attacked by acid on her face. Both incidents ruined her life very hard. But she didn’t lose her hope, and she continued to live in front of teasing society.

The following study of Viny Alvian Dhani portrays the theory of existentialism in Jojo Moyo’s *Me Before You* (2012). This research is focused on depression, self-esteem, losing self-identity and so on. The found problems are discussed with the theory of existentialism. Will is the main character, a hard worker who chooses things as he likes. But his parents have restricted his freedom. The restriction makes him to on depression and losing self-identity. The loss of

interest in daily life is discussed in this study under the depression of Will. Next, this study focuses on self-defeating. The theme of self-defeating is analysed by the psychological view of Will's life. The psychological effect makes Will to be becoming more emotional (Dhani, 2018). Like Namita Gokhale's *Things to Leave Behind* portrays the protagonist's life as emotional and depressed. The protagonist Tilottama fights for her rights in her married family. Because society has restriction on women's life. But Tilottama didn't like to follow other people's life. She became emotional and depressed when Tilottama didn't allow studying (Gokhale, 2011).

Therefore, feministic existentialism theory is applied to reveal the result of the study. The only way for this problem toward women is to bring their successful existence. Thus this research gap is fulfilled by the theory of existentialism's feministic views. Applying the feministic existentialism theory is different from one study to another. This comparisons of other studies with the result of Namita Gokhale's selected works, the researchers of this study can conclude that the ideas of feministic view of existentialism theory are reflected in women characters of Namita Gokhale's selected works *The Book of Shadows* (1999), *Priya: In Incredible Indyya* (2011) and *Things to Leave Behind* (2016).

## 5. Conclusion

This study emphasises ideas of feminism in existentialism theory, which has concepts concerning women's existence. The novelty of this research is concepts of feministic ideas in existentialism that are studied in Namita Gokhale's *Priya: In Incredible Indyya* (2011), *The Book of Shadows* (1999), and *Things to Leave Behind* (2016). Accordingly, from the current study results, the researchers can conclude that Namita Gokhale's selected texts reflect existentialist feminism theory's ideas. The ideas of existentialism theory focus on the select works of Namita Gokhale. For the comparisons, the researchers of this study selected the famous theorists of existentialism. The forthcoming researchers can research the following themes: psychoanalytic feminism, character analysis, and alienation.

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