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**Confronting the Self: An Existential Feminist Reading of Shashi Deshpande's  
The Dark Holds No Terrors**

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**Abstract:** This paper presents an existential feminist analysis of Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), focusing on how the main character, Sarita, deals with identity, freedom, and purpose in a patriarchal Indian society. Prior interpretations of the novel often use feminist and postcolonial perspectives. This analysis uses Simone de Beauvoir's theory of subjectivity to investigate the existential aspects of Sarita's internal experience. Despite achieving professional success as a doctor, Sarita remains emotionally fractured. Childhood trauma, her mother's rejection, and rigid societal norms continue to suppress her sense of individuality. Sarita's narrative explores themes of alienation, guilt, and self-doubt, mirroring the absurdity of strict gender expectations. By examining pivotal moments of reflection and resistance, this analysis posits that Sarita's growing self-awareness marks a progression toward authenticity. She doesn't just quietly accept the boundaries placed around her—she pushes back, making her own choices and taking charge of her life. For her, having a career is more than just a way out; it's a statement, a way to carve out independence even when the surrounding world feels stifling. When we look at Deshpande's work through an existential lens, it opens up a fresh way to think about Indian women's writing. All at once, these stories transcend simple tales of hardship—they reveal how even small, determined acts of resistance by a single individual can gradually unfold into genuine freedom, despite the harshest limitations.

**Introduction:** Indian English fiction has been greatly enriched by the powerful voices of women writers like Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Attia Hossain, and Shashi Deshpande. Through their stories, they have brought to light the quiet struggles of women living within the bounds of patriarchy and tradition. But their writing is not just about suffering—it also

explores the deep emotional and inner lives of women who are trying to find their own identity and space in a society that often refuses to see them as individuals. Among them, Shashi Deshpande stands out for the way she captures, with great sensitivity, the everyday dilemmas—emotional, intellectual, and deeply personal—faced by middle-class Indian women.

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Shashi Deshpande carefully tells the story of Sarita, known as Saru, a doctor who goes back to her parents' house after a difficult marriage. Saru appears successful, but she deals with childhood pain and a feeling of being separated from herself. Her story questions patriarchal norms but also explores what it means to be oneself when society defines her as different.

This paper examines the novel using existential feminism, using Simone de Beauvoir's concepts of immanence, transcendence, freedom, and responsibility. It argues that Saru's change reflects an existential awakening, not just social defiance. By looking inward through solitude and memory, she starts questioning the roles she has accepted: daughter, wife, and doctor. She begins to reclaim her identity, shaping it herself instead of letting others do it for her. The novel evolves into a reflection on the conflict between societal expectations and personal desires. Deshpande implies that being oneself comes from personal growth through thought, resistance, and the bravery to make individual choices.

**Theoretical Framework: Existential Feminism:** Existential feminism, as shaped by the thought of Simone de Beauvoir, gives us a powerful way to understand how women have long been seen—not as full individuals—but as “the Other” in relation to man, who is placed at the centre as the Subject or the Absolute. In her landmark work *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir writes, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir 283). With this, she makes it clear that being a woman is not about biology alone—it is about how society moulds that identity through culture, tradition, and the roles women are expected to play. This shaping often pushes women into lives of passivity and limitation, keeping them fixed in positions of immanence—where they are seen more as objects than as people with their own will and purpose.

Existentialist philosophy, in a broader sense, tells us that human beings are not born with a fixed essence or purpose. Instead, we are meant to create our own meaning through the choices we make and the actions we take. When we give in to societal pressures and accept roles without question, we fall into what existentialists call “bad faith”—we deny our own freedom and responsibility. In this light, existential feminism becomes a call for women to recognise their own freedom, to resist roles that are forced upon them, and to step into their own subjectivity. It's not just about fighting outer systems of oppression, but also about doing the inner work of choosing who one wants to be—fully, freely, and responsibly.

Seen in this light, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* becomes much more than just a personal story—it becomes a powerful narrative of existential feminist struggle. Sarita's life

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reflects the core tensions that lie at the heart of existential thought: the push and pull between who she truly is and the roles she is expected to play, between simply existing and consciously becoming, between the self she yearns to be and the social identity thrust upon her.

Though Sarita tries to find meaning in usual ways—like being the dutiful daughter, the good doctor, and the obedient wife—none of these give her real peace or happiness. Instead, each role slowly takes away her true self. She feels more broken inside than complete. More lost than steady. While trying to meet everyone’s expectations, Sarita, like many women, gets stuck in what Beauvoir calls “bad faith.” It means hiding her inner truth just to fit into the shape society gives her (Beauvoir 47). This kind of feeling lost happens because women are forced into fixed roles again and again. They do not get to be themselves fully or freely. Instead of making their own life choices, they remain trapped in limited spaces. They cannot openly show their true desires. The whole world is made for the “Absolute” man, and women stay on the sidelines (Beauvoir 17).

But everything begins to shift when she returns to her parental home. The silence, the distance from daily demands, and the space to reflect allow her to confront the layers of her own past and the hollowness of the roles she has played. Slowly, she begins to see the absurdity of living a life defined by others. This moment of reckoning is not dramatic, but deeply inward—it marks her first step toward choosing herself. Sarita’s journey from being a passive sufferer to someone who begins to take charge of her own selfhood echoes Beauvoir’s belief that true freedom doesn’t come by default—it must be claimed, consciously and courageously. Through Sarita, Deshpande shows us that the path to authentic identity is not through surrender, but through reflection, resistance, and the quiet, difficult work of self-definition.

**Sarita’s Childhood: Conditioning and “Otherness”:** Sarita’s existential struggle in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* finds its roots in the early wounds of her childhood, where her very gender decides her worth in the eyes of those closest to her. From a young age, she is made to feel lesser—not through harsh punishments or open scolding, but through something far more damaging: a quiet, consistent pattern of neglect, dismissal, and emotional sidelining. Her mother, bound by the same patriarchal beliefs she later passes on, becomes the first person to teach Sarita that being a girl means being second—always.

Her brother Dhruva, by contrast, is clearly the one who matters. He is celebrated, indulged, and protected, while Sarita’s birthdays go unnoticed and her achievements are met with indifference. Even her looks become a point of criticism. The oft-repeated warning—“Don’t go out in the sun. You’ll get even darker”—is more than just a comment on complexion. It reflects a deeply internalised fear: that a girl’s future depends on her marriageability, and that beauty, defined narrowly by fair skin, is her only asset. The painful conversation that follows lays bare the hierarchy within the home: “We have to get you married. And Dhruva? He’s different. He is a boy.” (Deshpande 45) In moments like these,

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Sarita is not just being told she is different—she is being told she is less. The home, which should offer comfort and belonging, becomes the first site of her alienation. This internalised sense of otherness becomes the foundation of her adult conflicts, shaping how she sees herself and how she allows the world to treat her.

This exchange between Sarita and her mother lays bare the deep structural imbalance at the very core of her upbringing. Her brother, Dhruva, is allowed to be himself—free to have agency, to make mistakes, to be different. Sarita, on the other hand, is gently but firmly pushed into the mould of submissive femininity, where obedience is praised and silence is expected. In light of Simone de Beauvoir’s existential feminist thinking, this is exactly how woman is “made”—not born. She is turned into “the Other” by the invisible but powerful forces of family, culture, and tradition that define what it means to be a woman.

For Sarita, this othering does not remain external—it seeps into her very being. The rejection she experiences becomes internalised, leaving her with a fragile sense of self-worth that follows her into adulthood. As psychoanalyst Winnicott points out, the mother plays a crucial role in shaping a child’s identity: “When the child looks at its mother, it sees itself. The child has to be seen in a way that makes it feel that it exists.” (78) But in Sarita’s case, the reflection she receives from her mother is not one of love or recognition, but of constant criticism and quiet invalidation.

Her memory sums it up with painful simplicity: “I was an ugly girl. At least, my mother told me so.” (Deshpande 61) For Sarita, her mother does not mirror back existence; she mirrors inadequacy. Instead of being made to feel seen and valued, Sarita is made to feel like a burden—something to be managed, not cherished. This early denial of emotional recognition plants the seeds of her lifelong search for approval, shaping both her personal and professional relationships in ways she is only able to question much later in life.

The trauma of Sarita’s fractured relationship with her mother is further deepened by the tragic death of her brother, Dhruva. While the novel never explicitly places blame on her, Sarita herself seems to carry the burden of an unspoken guilt, as though somewhere within her, the boundaries between thought and reality have blurred. As G. Dominic Savio points out, “Dhruva’s demise had always been her subconscious desire and there is a very thin demarcation between her wish and its fulfillment” (61). This insight suggests the presence of a repressed sibling rivalry, made more complex by the emotional imbalance in the household where one child was loved openly, while the other was merely tolerated. In many ways, Sarita lives out a kind of melancholia—her grief for Dhruva and the simultaneous, silent mourning for her mother’s love are never processed, never healed. Instead, they become part of the splintered self she carries into adulthood.

Her decision to go to Bombay and study medicine—openly defying her mother’s wishes—is not just a career move; it is an act of quiet rebellion. It marks her first serious attempt to break free from the roles assigned to her. Later, when she chooses to marry

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Manohar, a man from outside her caste, she once again steps beyond the lines drawn by tradition and family. While some critics, like Premila Paul, argue that “Saru is highly self-willed and her problems ensue because of her outsized ego and innate love for power over others” (12), such a view seems to miss the deeper existential struggle beneath the surface.

As Kumaran and Hakeem (2025) rightly observe, “By emphasizing the fragility of identity and the existential crises that accompany attempts to assert autonomy in an unforgiving world,” (228) Deshpande shows us that Sarita’s choices are not rooted in pride, but in desperation—for visibility, for selfhood, for a life that is truly hers. Her rebellion is not the arrogance of someone seeking control over others, but the quiet defiance of someone refusing to be erased. Whether it is the decision to pursue medicine or to marry for love, each step she takes is a step toward becoming, in a world that constantly asks her to stay small, silent, and invisible.

Yet, when Sarita dares to choose freedom, her mother’s response is one of complete and unforgiving rejection. After Sarita leaves home, her mother disowns her with a line that cuts deeper than any punishment: “What daughter? I have no daughter” (Deshpande 109). With these words, Sarita’s alienation is sealed. The one identity she was ever truly allowed—that of a daughter—is stripped away. The break is not just emotional; it is existential. Her very being is denied by the person who gave her life. So deep is this wound that Sarita later begins to believe her suffering in marriage is the result of a curse, a kind of karmic punishment for going against her mother’s wishes. Her pain, in her mind, becomes not just personal, but fated.

What happens here is not just a private tragedy—it shows a bigger cultural system. From childhood, girls are taught to shape themselves after great mythological women like Sita, Savitri, Draupadi, and Gandhari. These figures are very important in Indian tradition. They stand for patience, self-sacrifice, loyalty, and above all, a wife’s obedience. Girls like Sarita grow up hearing these stories again and again. They learn that being obedient is good, and that keeping quiet when suffering is a kind of strength. The story makes this very clear: a wife’s submission is not natural but ensured through social conditioning. This training starts early in childhood and goes on through teenage years and adulthood. It shapes women’s minds and lives, pushing them to accept these roles quietly. So, the problem is much bigger than just one woman’s story. It’s about a whole culture that teaches women to stay silent and obedient, no matter what.

So when a woman like Sarita—educated, capable, and self-aware—tries to claim her individuality, she finds herself caught in a painful tug-of-war. Her training in docility clashes with her growing desire for autonomy. And it is this inner conflict—between who she was told to be and who she is trying to become—that threatens to unravel the foundation of her adult life. Nowhere is this tension felt more acutely than in her marriage, where the old scripts of submission continue to haunt her, even as she tries to write new ones.

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In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Deshpande does not treat Sarita's childhood as just a backdrop to her adult life—it becomes the very ground on which her existential despair is built. The emotional rejection she experiences as a girl—deepened by her decision to cross caste boundaries, her mother's eventual abandonment, and the silent pressures of a culture that demands submission from women—all come together to splinter her sense of self. When Sarita returns to her childhood home, it is not simply a return to a physical space. It is a symbolic homecoming to the site of her earliest pain—a place where she was first made to feel like an outsider within her own family.

This return forces her to confront the wounds she has spent her life running from. It is here, in the quiet of the old house, that she begins to realise something profound: freedom cannot be found only in rebellion or by leaving behind the people who hurt her. True liberation, Deshpande suggests, begins with facing the truth. Sarita must look into the same mirror that once showed her a reflection shaped by rejection and shame—and begin to question it. She must meet the self that was taught she was not enough and ask if that belief was ever really hers to carry. In this way, Deshpande leads us to see that healing and selfhood are not about forgetting the past, but about making peace with it—and, ultimately, choosing a different future.

**The Retreat Home: Facing the Absurd and Reflecting on Freedom:** In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Sarita's return to her childhood home marks a vital confrontation with her existence, not a regression. After fifteen years, she comes back to a place saturated with recollections, suffering, and unresolved issues. This return is both physical and mental, blurring lines between past and present, self and shadow. The house she left in anger now forces her to confront her silence, childhood traumas, and the person she is now.

The once-dismissed home becomes a mirror reflecting her past and her fragmented identity. Sarita's observation, "Once I found myself cutting a piece of paper, telling myself... these are bits of my mind falling on the ground..." (Deshpande, 22), shows Deshpande capturing her realization of her fragmented self. In solitude, Sarita sees the absurdity of her life, not with despair, but with understanding. The contradictions, compromises, and imposed roles become clear. Her return is not about seeking comfort but about gaining clarity, marking the start of reclaiming her identity on her terms.

In existential philosophy, the absurd means the gap between how much humans want meaning in life and how the universe doesn't really care. Sarita faces this absurdity quietly in her father's house. That house is like a symbol of emptiness and long-held silence. Her father is distant, unable to give her any warmth or connection. He shows how silence has become the family's habit, a silence that has passed down through generations and stopped any real closeness between husband and wife, father and daughter. He says, "Silence has become a habit for us" (Deshpande, 199), admitting this deep emotional gap. When Sarita comes back, she hopes to break this silence—not just as a daughter talking to her father, but

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as a woman trying to connect with a man. But even then, her father shuts himself away in silence again. He leaves her words hanging, unanswered.

Beauvoir's existential feminism offers a crucial framework to understand this crisis. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir writes that marriage renders the woman immanent, transferring her as property from one patriarch to another: "She is annexed to her husband's universe; she offers him her person" (506). This is precisely what Sarita realizes in hindsight. Her marriage, once a symbol of rebellion against her mother's control, eventually became another prison. Initially idealizing Manu as her escape route, she later witnesses his transformation into a violent, jealous man, unable to digest her professional success. His ego collapses when her public image overshadows his own, as reflected in the young journalist's pointed question: "How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?" (Deshpande, 200).

This inversion of roles destabilizes Manu's masculine identity. The culmination of his insecurity manifests in sexual violence, stripping Sarita of any illusion of love or safety in marriage: "He attacked me like an animal that night... With his hands, his teeth, his whole body" (Deshpande, 201). In one of the most harrowing passages, Sarita recalls:

The hurting hands, the savage teeth, the monstrous assault of a horribly familiar body. And above me, a face I could not recognize. Total noncomprehension, completely; bewilderment, paralyzed me for a while. Then I began to struggle. But my body, hurt and painful, could do nothing against the fearful strength which overwhelmed me. (Deshpande, 112)

This moment of physical and emotional disintegration marks more than just personal suffering—it signals an existential rupture. The body, once a vessel of love, connection, and intimacy, is transformed into a site of violence and estrangement. As Habeeb and Sait (2025) note, "Trauma, whether experienced on an individual or collective level, serves as a disruptive element that disturbs the continuity of identity and narrative coherence" (154). For Sarita, that disruption runs deep. Even her name—changed to Geetanjali after marriage—reflects this erasure. What was intended as a gesture of honor and cultural integration instead becomes a symbol of lost identity. She is no longer seen as herself, but as someone molded to fit a patriarchal mold, where submission is the price for belonging and protection. The trauma is not limited to the body; it extends into her sense of self, her desires, and her voice. "And for me sex was now a dirty word" (Deshpande, 133), she confesses, revealing not only the horror of marital rape but the deeper existential collapse—where bodily autonomy and the capacity for desire have been stripped away.

This realization—of having merely exchanged one form of bondage for another—forces Sarita into the solitude of her father's home, where she attempts to piece together her shattered sense of self. Existential feminism insists that true freedom cannot be handed down or permitted by others; it must be claimed through conscious choice. As Beauvoir argues,

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selfhood is not achieved by passively inhabiting roles but by transcending them through reflection, action, and moral responsibility.

In this regard, Sarita’s father becomes both a metaphorical and literal test of her need for external validation. She pleads with him for help—“But you have got to help me, you have got to. You did it once. And because you did, I went to Bombay, met him and married him” (Deshpande, 204), desperately hoping to reenact the initial moment of escape. But his failure to respond, and his quiet withdrawal, leaves her with the most painful of truths: that no one can save her. “Baba, I’m unhappy. Help me Baba, I’m in trouble. Tell me what to do” (Deshpande, 44), these words, though unspoken, encapsulate the child’s lingering hope for rescue. Their futility, however, underscores the existential lesson: the responsibility of freedom rests solely on the self.

Sarita’s awakening does not come through dramatic rebellion or overt resolution. It is quiet, interior, and deeply personal. She realizes that the terror she has felt all her life—of darkness, of rejection, of loneliness—was not inherent in the world, but created by her own internalization of other people’s expectations and judgments. She ceases to view herself as a victim of circumstance and begins to understand the possibility of choosing her own meaning, even amidst uncertainty.

This movement from passivity to agency, from objecthood to subjectivity, is the core of existential feminism. As Ahmad Bahjat Albtoush notes, “The key purpose of existentialist feminism isn’t to see a woman’s experiences as part of a collective, but as an individual experience” (1345). Sarita’s journey, therefore, is not about asserting a universal womanhood, but about reclaiming her singular voice and will. Her old self, tethered to familial guilt, social roles, and marital expectations, has died. What emerges in its place is a woman who must now live not for others, but through her own conscious decisions. Her transformation is not complete, nor is it heroic in the traditional sense. But it is authentic—echoing the existential feminist framework discussed by Albtoush, where the female character’s emancipation lies not in conforming to ideals, but in breaking away from them to assert her own agency.

Thus, the retreat home is not an end but a beginning—a return not to the past, but to the self. By facing the absurdities of her life and refusing to be defined by them, Sarita prepares to move forward, not as a daughter or wife or doctor, but simply as Sarita: a human being ready to assume the burden and the beauty of freedom.

**Conclusion:** Shashi Deshpande’s *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is not merely a story of a woman’s suffering, but a powerful existential and feminist exploration of identity, autonomy, and the layered trauma born of patriarchal conditioning. Through the character of Sarita, the novel traces the psychological arc of a woman who navigates childhood alienation, gender-based suppression, marital violence, and internalized guilt to finally arrive at a point of introspective clarity. Her journey is emblematic of the struggle many women face in

patriarchal societies where the expectations of daughterhood, womanhood, and wifehood intersect with denial, emotional neglect, and the suppression of agency.

Sarita's early life is shaped by a mother who privileges the male child, reinforcing a hierarchy of gender that conditions Sarita into "otherness." Her internalization of inferiority, guilt over her brother's death, and the subsequent rejection by her mother lay the foundation for her fractured selfhood. These childhood wounds remain unresolved into adulthood, reemerging in her troubled marriage with Manohar, where her professional success becomes a threat to her husband's fragile masculinity. The violence Sarita endures is not only physical but symbolic—it is the culmination of a lifetime of being denied subjecthood.

Yet the retreat to her father's home becomes an existential threshold. In the emotional barrenness of the house, she is forced into solitude, a condition which existentialism does not view as despair but as the necessary condition for self-realization. Simone de Beauvoir's framework helps to understand how Sarita moves from a state of immanence—where she is defined by her roles as daughter, wife, and woman in a patriarchal society—to a state of transcendence, where she begins to claim authorship of her own life.

Sarita's existential awakening does not take the form of dramatic confrontation or heroic rebellion. Instead, it is a quiet, inner revolution—one rooted in her ability to see clearly the illusions she had accepted as truth. Her rejection of passivity, her decision to stop enduring and start choosing, marks the emergence of authentic subjectivity. The novel refuses closure in the traditional sense; it does not offer Sarita a fully redeemed life, a reconciled marriage, or a triumphant professional arc. Instead, it offers something more radical: the possibility of selfhood beyond imposed identities.

Deshpande's narrative, thus, aligns with the core tenets of existential feminism: that freedom is not given but claimed; that authenticity emerges only when one ceases to be an object in others' narratives and begins to write one's own; and that solitude, rather than being feared, must be embraced as the space where transformation begins. In a world that demands women's silence, submission, and sacrifice, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* dares to assert that meaning must be made, not inherited—and that even in the darkest corners of existence, one can begin again.

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