

## Exploring the Intersection of Feminist and Psychoanalytic Theory in the Confessional Poetry of Anita Nair and Kamala Das

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### ABSTRACT

The genre of confessional poetry is defined by the poet's personal and frequently extremely emotional experiences. It first appeared in the middle of the 20th century and is characterised by a personal tone and the first-person point of view. This paper shall examine the confessional elements in the poetry of two prominent Indian poets, Anita Nair and Kamala Das, through a feminist and psychoanalytic perspective. In order to examine themes of love, relationships, and identity in their poetry, Nair and Das use personal experiences, emotions, and thoughts in their poems. The paper will examine the intricate power relationships between men and women underlying Nair and Das' poetry. The paper will emphasise the complex intersection of gender, power, and personal experience that underlies Anita Nair's and Kamala Das's poetry through an analysis of the confessional elements in their works.

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## INTRODUCTION

Confessional poetry, a genre that first appeared in the middle of the 20th century, concentrates on the poet's personal experiences and feelings, frequently touching on taboo subjects like sexuality, mental illness, and trauma. The work of the confessional poets frequently dealt with their own lives, addressing their deepest emotions and experiences. It is distinguished by its unvarnished, open, and helpless writing style, which frequently employs the first person. Confessional poetry frequently digs into the subconscious and analyses the workings of the mind, making it an appealing venue for psychoanalytic investigation. The self-reflective analyses of the lives of poets frequently illustrate that cultural norms and suppressed impulses can affect and shape behaviour. It sheds light on how gendered power dynamics might become internalised and show up in psychoanalytic theory and mental health issues. The paper will emphasise the complex intersection of feminism and psychoanalysis in the poetry of Anita Nair and Kamala Das by analysing the confessional elements in their works.

The theoretical foundation of feminist theory in India is based on the country's unique sociocultural environment while referencing feminist philosophy from around the world. It stresses the necessity for an intersectional strategy to confront many types of oppression and acknowledges the intricate interactions between gender and other social categories. Indian feminist theory aims to build a more equal and just society for all people by opposing patriarchy, advancing women's agency and empowerment, and tackling issues of violence and discrimination. There is a need for indigenous feminist ideas that are more firmly established in local contexts, according to some who contend that Western feminist conceptions and frameworks may not adequately represent the intricacies of Indian society. So, because of these concerns, feminist theory has developed in India, where several significant works have emerged and influenced movements and conversations. The theoretical foundation of feminist theory in India has also significantly benefited from the efforts of researchers, workers and poets like Uma Chakravarti, Susie Tharu, Savitribai Phule, Sarojini Naidu and Kamala Das. Uma Chakravarti, in *Rewriting History: The Life and Times*, about Pandita Ramabai, questions conventional historiography and explores the perspectives of women from underrepresented groups. A comprehensive collection that showcases the literary accomplishments of Indian women throughout history is *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present* by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita.

The Freudian psychoanalytical fundamentals are acknowledged in the theoretical framework of psychoanalysis in India, which also adapts these ideas to the sociocultural setting of the nation. It recognises the significance of cultural sensitivity, the interplay of individual and collective identity, and the complexity of gender and sexuality. Psychoanalysis in India is still developing, offering a framework for comprehending and dealing with psychological problems within the various cultural terrain of the nation by responding to criticisms and incorporating opposing viewpoints.

## THEORETICAL REVIEW

Before the emergence of the novel as a prominent literary form in India, women writers in the country predominantly engaged in crafting poetry and short stories in their respective regional languages. During the mid-nineteenth century, within the colonial context of British India, a notable shift occurred as Indian women who had received education in Western countries began expressing themselves in English. This marked a significant departure from traditional norms, influenced by Western ideologies and English language education, positioning these women as pioneering figures in English literary creation. Their writings became a platform to explore themes such as female education, gendered social reform, female perspectives, and the complexities of colonial modernity. Notably, Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu emerged as remarkable early instances of women who embraced English as a means of literary expression, thus setting the stage for others to follow suit. However, the adoption of English for expression also posed a challenge to the established patriarchal structure due to its transformative potential, leading some women to initially avoid speaking and writing in English. Despite this, by the mid-nineteenth century, an increasing number of women found their voice through English writing. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain stands out for her efforts to dismantle the "purdah of ignorance" through her literary works. One of her notable works, the imaginative utopian narrative "Sultana's Dream," envisions a world governed by women, where men are confined to the equivalent of women's quarters known as Murdana.

Women writers of contemporary times have embarked on employing increasingly innovative and impactful cultural and linguistic approaches within their literary works. Commencing in the 1980s, writers from the Indian diaspora gained noteworthy international recognition. The postcolonial narratives produced by these modern diasporic writers, characterized by their novel narrative experiments and distinctive stylization, are notably centred around themes encompassing postcolonial migration experiences, the complexities of cultural identity and ethnicity, sentiments of nostalgia, sensations of alienation, and the challenges of displacement. A cadre of acclaimed Indian diasporic women writers, including Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Meena Alexander, and Anita Nair, stand out for their significant contributions within this literary landscape.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach to analyse the works of Anita Nair and Kamala Das in order to explore their shared feminist concerns. Primary focus is given to the poems of Nair and Das, while supplementary sources, including scholarly articles and literary critiques related to their works, serve as secondary sources for context and critical insights. The research endeavours to uncover underlying themes of societal pressures, power dynamics, and women's identities through a thorough literary analysis of the selected poems. By employing a descriptive method, the

researchers delve into the nuances of each poem, employing interpretive techniques to unveil hidden meanings and thematic nuances. The methodology involves a comprehensive reading and examination of the poems, followed by the identification, scrutiny, and contextualization of relevant quotations. Throughout the research process, the goal is to extract meaningful patterns, messages, and concerns present in the poetry. The analysis is complemented by references to other literature and articles that contribute to a broader understanding of the themes explored. Ultimately, the findings of this study will be used to draw insightful conclusions and recommendations that contribute to the broader discourse on gender equality and women's empowerment.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Anita Nair is an Indian poet and novelist best known for her novels *The Better Man*, *Ladies Coupé*, *Mistress*, *Lessons in Forgetting*, *Idris: Keeper of the Light* and *Alphabet Soup for Lovers*. Her first book of poetry, *Malabar Mind* (2002), is a fascinating collection that deftly explores the overlaps between the real and the imagined, the physical and the metaphysical. In her poetry, Nair explores the impact of connections between gender, sexuality, and power on individual experiences and identities. Nair explores our deepest, most hidden motivations and irrational fears that affect our interpersonal and extra-personal interactions. The complexity and diversity in the lives of women are celebrated in her poetry.

The speaker in "The Face Mask" compares her personal journey of self-discovery and growth. The poem is a critique of women's social pressures to adhere to particular beauty standards. Using organic components like turmeric and sandalwood symbolises a protest against the beauty industry's commodification of women's bodies. Furthermore, the speaker's rejection of the patriarchal society that values women solely for their outward looks might be inferred from her desire to "remove any signs of terrible mild praise." It is a moving commentary on the nature of self-discovery and transformation by highlighting the intricate interplay between cultural expectations, unconscious emotions, and personal experience.

In the poem "Co-dependent" we see the speaker's unconscious tensions and emotions about their part in the co-dependent relationship with a drug addict. A co-dependent relationship is implied by the speaker's portrayal as a "weary acolyte" looking for indications of reliance on the other person. It is possible to consider the speaker's willingness to forego their own interests in favour of another person as a result of patriarchal training that promotes women to be selfless and nurturing.

In, Anita Nair's poem "The House is Waiting" it is clear from the lyrics "Hush my baby, hush, don't you cry / Neglect is a habit need to learn young" that the protagonist has internalised the idea that neglect is a typical and

expected aspect of her life as a woman. The speaker feels like a "whore" who exchanges her body for company. This work powerfully conveys the challenges with identity, language, and societal expectations women in India encountered in the middle of the 20th century.

Anita Nair's poem "Why Women Dream" examines the common experiences of a working woman and the hardships and difficulties that women face on a daily basis, such as harassment and objectification. Men who ride public transport with her, gaze at her and treat her like a "fair piece of flesh." The fact that she must "suffer in silence" due to the guilt of being objectified adds to the suffering of these experiences. The woman ultimately finds solace and safety in the arms of her beloved, who offers her a warm and secure place to rest and recover.

The speaker in "Free Fall" conveys her desire to be physically loved and desired. She appears to feel imprisoned in her home because her spouse is ignorant of her, and her kids do not demand much from her. The speaker diving into a rock pool, finding coral gardens and hidden tunnels, and taking a merman lover symbolises her yearning for liberation and an escape from the monotonous realities of her life. The term "free fall" denotes a willingness to take chances and live life fully, even if it means letting go of the comfort and security of the known.

Kamala Das, also known as Madhavikutty, was a renowned Indian poet and author who published in Malayalam and English. Her poetry is well-known for its unvarnished, confessional, and intensely personal nature, frequently exploring love, sexuality, gender roles, and the complexities of interpersonal relationships. Her poetry is marked by anguish, suffering, and a fierce determination to express her truth, challenge societal norms and expectations, and assert her agency and autonomy. Kamala Das's poetry is potent and resonant because of the challenging circumstances of her life, i.e, neglectful parenting, challenging marriage, heartbreak in love, and extramarital affairs. She was a feminist, an advocate for women's rights, and a critic of patriarchal structures restricting women's freedom.

In her poem "An Introduction", she explores the psychological effects of societal expectations on women's identities. Das finds it difficult to balance her needs and feeling of self with the demands her culture and family place on her. As a result of this fight, she encounters humiliation and self-doubt. She says that just like her identity, her language is a fusion of English and Indian, reflecting her own distinct view. She writes

Why not leave  
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,  
Every one of you? Why not let me speak in  
Any language I like? (Das, 78)

She talks of feeling "beaten" by the burden of her own womanhood expressing her pressure to fit in with cultural standards and traditional gender roles. She tries to reject her femininity by dressing like a man and cutting her hair short. She writes

Dress in sarees, be girl  
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,  
Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in. Oh,  
Belong, cried the categorizers. (Das,79)

Kamala Das emphasises the limiting nature of these expectations, which require women to assume specific roles and behaviours in order to "Fit in" and "Belong,". Das addresses mental health and sexuality in the poem, telling women not to "play at schizophrenia" or be labelled as nymphomaniacs instead, she encourages people to be themselves without worrying about what others may think.

Das's poem "Relationship" addresses the issues of power relations between men and women and themes of love, desire, and betrayal. The speaker says, "It was my desire that made him male And beautiful", implying that women are expected to be submissive in relationships and satisfy male needs. However, the speaker also emphasises her desire for love by saying that the only place she will find "rest, sleep, peace, and even death" is in the arms of her betrayer.

Kamala Das, in her poem "The Suicide" in the collection, *The Descendants* (1967), presents the mental strain from cultural norms as well as from traumatic love and betrayal. The poem's speaker begins by reflecting on death and wonders which is "more dead", the body or the soul. Only the souls are allowed to enter the sea's vortex. Therefore, she discards the bodies since she can't abide by their fragrance. A.N. Dwivedi writes in *Kamala Das and her Poetry*, that the

theme is the poet's contemplated or suggested suicide, but the poem finally rejects it through a renewal of the sense of life. As in her view the body and the soul are inseparable, the poet can't choose between a physical death and a spiritual death. (Dwivedi, 16)

The experiences of love and betrayal led her to crave death. The internal conflict between the speaker's superego and id is reminiscent of this poem, where the superego stands in for society's ideals and moral standards, whereas the id symbolises primal and primordial desires like the desire for death. The

speaker's superego is the pressure to live up to social norms, while her id is the longing for death.

Das's "The Dance of The Eunuchs" in the *Summer in Calcutta* collection portrays eunuchs as dry and lifeless, resembling partially burned logs from funeral pyres, which alludes to a lack of vitality and wholeness. The cultural perception of eunuchs as imperfect or abnormal does not conform to the strict gender binary. The poem also describes the eunuchs as having a mixture of feminine and masculine characteristics, including "long braids" and "jasmine in their hair", in contrast to "harsh voices". The eunuchs symbolize the fluidity of gender and sexuality, which undermines conventional ideas of binary gender roles. The eunuchs express themselves by beating their breasts or drums and crying in vacuous bliss while others dance till they bleed. This could be interpreted as a means of coping with their trauma and pain and a sort of protest against the oppression from society. Their melancholy performance and songs about lost loves and unborn children have been described as reflecting their personal experiences with loss and longing. The eunuchs emphasise the value of self-expression and resistance against oppression and serve as a potent metaphor for the hardships of people who do not fit into traditional norms.

The poem, "The Old Playhouse" in the collection *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973) is a potent satire of a patriarchal relationship that makes the speaker feel trapped and helpless. Her desires and needs were disregarded as she was raised to obey and serve her lover's needs. The speaker laments her lover's self-centeredness and ego. Without any agency or autonomy of her own, she is reduced to nothing more than the object of his desire, reduced to the size of a dwarf, obedient, and helpless. The poem compares love to Narcissus by the side of the water watching the reflection of his own lonely face. According to Das, true love must strive for pure, absolute liberation and an end to this circle of self-absorption. To escape the harmful patterns of patriarchal relationships, love must command the "mirrors to crack" and the "kind night to erase the water". This suggests that love is not just about self-reflection, but about breaking free from it in order to connect with the world around us. "The Old Playhouse" condemns a dominating relationship and a strong appeal for women to claim their own agency and pursue true independence and autonomy.

In her poems, Kamala Das frequently examines her feelings and experiences, commenting on her conflicts with cultural norms and struggle for autonomy and agency. On the other hand, Anita Nair frequently explores issues like identity, relationships, and power dynamics in her poetry, which frequently depicts women's lives in modern India. They look at how cultural expectations and societal norms influence behaviour and how patriarchal frameworks frequently restrict women's freedom and autonomy. A more contained and controlled tone distinguishes Anita Nair's poem from Kamala Das' poems characterised by an unadorned, raw, and profoundly intimate aspect. In her writings, Kamala Das is renowned for portraying female sexuality openly and honestly, which went against the traditional social norm of her period. In her writings, she presents women as powerful, independent people

who are not afraid to speak out for their desires and aspirations, even if doing so goes against social norms. The themes of love and relationships are also present in Anita Nair's writings, but she takes a more subtle and nuanced approach. She frequently depicts men and women as equal partners in a relationship who must cooperate to establish balance and harmony in their interactions. She illustrates the difficulties that both men and women encounter while attempting to live up to the expectations that society has for them and how these expectations can damage their relationships.

Despite the temporal difference between their works, Anita Nair and Kamala Das share comparable feminist concerns and advocate for women's equality in their poetry. Both poets address the pressures and expectations imposed on women by society. The poem "The Face Mask" by Nair critiques the commodification of women's bodies by the beauty industry and highlights the pressure to conform to beauty standards. Similarly, "An Introduction" by Das examines the psychological effects of societal expectations on women's identities and the struggle to balance individual requirements with cultural and familial obligations. Both poets emphasise the importance of women breaking free from these restrictive expectations and expressing themselves in an authentic manner.

Second, both poets investigate the dynamics of power and the objectification of women. The poem "Why Women Dream" by Nair depicts the daily struggles women face, such as harassment and objectification. Similarly, the poem "Relationship" by Das examines power dynamics between men and women, emphasising the submissive role that is expected of women in relationships. Both poems highlight the necessity for women to assert their autonomy and challenge patriarchal structures that perpetuate inequality and objectification.

Thirdly, both poets investigate the complexities of female identity and the struggle for self-realization. The poem "Co-dependent" by Nair suggests that women's altruism and nurturing tendencies may be the result of patriarchal training. Das's poem "The Old Playhouse" satirises a patriarchal relationship that renders the speaker helpless and bound. Both poems emphasise the significance of women asserting their independence and asserting their own desires and requirements.

Moreover, both poets explore the experiences of women who have internalised societal norms and expectations. The protagonist of Nair's poem "The House is Waiting" accepts neglect as a normal aspect of her existence as a woman. Similarly, the poem "The Suicide" by Das depicts the internal conflict between societal ideals and primordial desires, reflecting the influence of cultural norms and traumatic experiences on the mental health of women.

Despite the difference in time between their works, Anita Nair and Kamala Das share a feminist concern. Both poets challenge patriarchal structures, address societal pressures and expectations imposed on women, explore female identity and self-discovery, and advocate for women's equality and agency. Their poems are potent expressions of women's struggles,

experiences, and aspirations, highlighting the ongoing struggle for gender equality and freedom.

### **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In exploring the works of Anita Nair and Kamala Das, it becomes evident that these two poets, despite the temporal separation of their compositions, share a remarkable alignment in their feminist concerns. Their poetry critically addresses prevailing societal norms, power dynamics, and women's roles, serving as a powerful medium to advocate for women's equality and self-determination. Through distinct narrative styles and symbolism, Nair and Das highlight women's multifaceted challenges and emphasize the urgency of breaking free from patriarchal constraints. The inclusion of Nair's and Das's works in literature curricula would expose students to profound feminist perspectives and encourage critical analysis of gender roles in literature. Through textual exploration, students can better understand societal structures and women's experiences. Further studies can delve into the intersectionality in Nair's and Das's works, examining how their poems address various dimensions like race, class, and sexuality. Such research would offer a more nuanced understanding of the interconnected complexities of women's lives. By relating the themes in Nair's and Das's works to contemporary feminist issues and movements, scholars can highlight the continued relevance of their messages and facilitate discussions about ongoing challenges.

### **FURTHER STUDY**

Delving into the psychological motivations underlying characters' actions in Nair's and Das's poetry would offer insights into women's internal struggles when navigating societal norms and expectations. An exploration of the portrayal of women's mental health in Nair's and Das's poems could contribute to discussions on gendered experiences of mental well-being and the effects of societal norms. Also, a linguistic examination of their poetry could reveal how language choices and symbolism contribute to the portrayal of feminist concerns and the expression of women's agency. Through these avenues of study, scholars can deepen their understanding of how Nair and Das contribute to the feminist literary canon and enrich the ongoing discourse on gender equality.

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