

Reconfiguring Female Interiority: Confessional Modalities in Jane Austen and Kamala Das

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Abstract:

This paper is going to examine the ways in which female interiority is constructed and reconfigured through distinct confessional modalities in the works of Jane Austen and Kamala Das. While Jane Austen employs free indirect discourse and ironic narrative mediation to delineate ethical introspection within the socio-cultural confines of Regency England, Kamala Das foregrounds explicit first-person confessional writing, articulating desire, identity, and resistance in post-colonial India. Drawing on feminist narratology, post-colonial feminist theory, and Foucault's theory of confession, this paper argues that both authors utilize confessional modalities as strategies to assert female epistemic and narrative authority. By juxtaposing these authors, this present study highlights the evolving literary techniques used by women writers to reclaim interior space and challenge patriarchal silencing, situating their works in a historical continuum of female self-expression.

Keywords: Female interiority, confessional writing, articulating desire, identity, resistance, Jane Austen, Kamala Das, feminist narratology, post-colonial literature, patriarchal.

Introduction

Literature has long been a space for exploring human consciousness, yet the articulation of female interiority has historically been constrained by societal norms that defined women through relational, domestic, or moral roles. Women's inner lives were often rendered invisible or subordinated to male narratives, with their desires, moral deliberations, and subjectivities mediated by patriarchal expectations. In response, women writers have developed confessional strategies to articulate subjective experience, asserting moral, emotional, and epistemic agency. Confession, in both its subtle and overt forms, emerges as a critical modality through which women reclaim interiority as a literary and ethical space.

Jane Austen, writing in early nineteenth-century England, explores female interiority through free indirect discourse, irony, and moral introspection, balancing the constraints of Regency social norms with the need for self-expression. Her protagonists' thoughts, emotions, and ethical deliberations are subtly mediated by the narrative voice, allowing readers access to consciousness without overt self-revelation.

In contrast, Kamala das, writing in twentieth-century post-colonial India, foregrounds first person confession, articulating bodily, emotional, and sexual subjectivity with unprecedented candor. Das's poetry and autobiography collapse the boundaries between private and public spheres, transforming interiority into a performative act of resistance against patriarchal and post-colonial pressures.

This paper investigates how both authors—Jane Austen and Kamala Das reconfigure female interiority through their distinct confessional modalities. Despite differences in historical, cultural, and linguistic contexts, both writers share a common objective: asserting female subjectivity as a site of narrative authority. By juxtaposing their approaches, this study elucidates the historical evolution of confessional modalities and their significance in feminist literary discourse.

Literature review

Often, scholarship on Austen has extensively emphasized her narrative irony, social critic, and exploration of moral growth within the marriage plot. Gilbert and Gubar (1979) highlight Austen's negotiation of patriarchal constraints, suggesting that her novels subtly contest the limitations placed upon women's social and intellectual autonomy. Lancer (1992) emphasizes on the Interplay between narrative voice and epistemic authority, arguing that Austen's free indirect discourse allows her heroines to articulate interiority within socially sanctioned limits. While these studies foreground Austen's moral and ethical sensibilities, few explicitly situate her narrative techniques within the broader confessional tradition.

Critical evaluation on Kamala Das have largely focused on her sexual frankness, autobiographical candor, and subversive postcolonial context. Scholar, such as Menon (2003) identifies Das's confessional writing as a deliberate act of self-assertion and resistance, emphasizing the radical reclamation of bodily and

emotional subjectivity. Rege (2015) situates Das's work within post-colonial feminist frameworks, highlighting how her confessional voice challenges societal silencing and cultural repression. Despite extensive attention to her confessional modalities, comparative studies that situate Kamala Das alongside earlier women writers, particularly regarding interiority and narrative authority, remain limited.

This evaluative paper addresses that gap by conceptualizing confession broadly—as both meditated introspection and overt first-person self-exposure—highlighting its role in asserting female epistemic and narrative authority to across historical contexts.

Theoretical Framework

Michael Foucault's notion of confession provides a critical lens for analyzing the literary strategies employed by Austen and Das. According to Foucault, confession is not merely the disclosure of hidden truths; it is a discursive technology through which subjects produce knowledge about themselves, operating within structures of power and authority for (Foucault 58-63). Confession in literature, therefore, encompasses both explicit autobiographical revelation and subtle narrative techniques that make interiority intelligible to readers.

Feminist narratology further highlights the gendered stakes of narrative authority. Lanser (1992) argues that the capacity to narrate one's interior experience constitutes an assertion of epistemic legitimacy, particularly for women historically excluded from public discourse. In Austen, confessional strategies are implicit, mediated, and socially constrained, while in Das, they are explicit, performative, and confrontational, articulating desire and identity beyond normative limits.

Postcolonial feminist theory adds another dimension to Das's work. Writing in a postcolonial context, Kamala Das appropriates the English language to articulate both personal and cultural subjectivity, creating a confessional space that resists colonial, patriarchal, and societal silencing. Together, these theoretical perspectives illuminate how confession functions as a site of empowerment, negotiation, and resistance across historical and cultural contexts.

Within this framework, Austen disciplined narrative mediations, and Das's direct first-person confession emerge as complementary strategies for reclaiming female subjectivity.

Analysis

Jane Austen: Mediated Confession and Ethical Interiorization

Jane Austen's novels, including *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, explore female consciousness through free indirect discourse, a technique that mediates thought and feeling within narrative authority. Her heroines' internal reflections function as subtle confessions, revealing ethical and emotional development rather than purely personal disclosure.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet's reflection on her prejudices exemplifies mediated confession:

“She grew absolutely ashamed of herself. Of neither Darcy nor Wickham could she think without feeling she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd.” (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 202)

Here, the confessional moment is morally regulated; Elizabeth's interiority is both personal and socially cognizant. The narrative permits insight into her self-awareness while remaining ethically moderated.

Similarly, in *Emma* the protagonist's self-approach is revealed through narrative irony:

“How could she have been so blind! How could she have misconceived everything!” (Austen, *Emma*, Vol. II Ch. 8)

Austen's confessional modality operates within societal and moral constraints, emphasizing ethical reflection, cognitive growth, and moral self-cultivation. Her heroines' interiority is thus a site of moral and social negotiation, demonstrating the subtle power of mediated confession as a literary strategy.

Kamala Das: Radical Confession and Embodied Subjectivity

In contrast, Das foregrounds first-person confession, articulating emotional, sexual, and linguistic autonomy. In *Summer in Calcutta*, she asserts:

“I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar, I speak three languages, write in English, dream in English...” (Das, *Summer in Calcutta* 26)

This declaration foregrounds her identity Linguistic agency, marking interiority as a public assertion of selfhood. Her autobiography, *My Story*, extends this strategy,

collapsing private and public spheres, and articulating desire as a political and ethical statement:

“I have loved, I have lived, I have experienced... why should I hide it?”

Das’s confessional mode destabilizes normative social expectations, transforming interiority into a radical self-expression. Her writing underscores the embodiment of female consciousness, contrasting with Austen’s morally mediated introspection.

Comparative textual analysis

Author	Works & Year	Passage
Jane Austen	<i>Pride and Prejudice</i> (1813)	“She grew absolutely ashamed of herself...absurd.”
Jane Austen	<i>Emma</i> (1815)	“How could she have been so blind...”
Kamala Das	<i>Summer in Calcutta</i> (1965)	“I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar...”
Kamala Das	<i>My story</i> (1976)	“I have loved, I have lived, I have experienced...”
Kamala Das	<i>The Old Playhouse</i> (1973)	“I am tired of being woman, confined in the body society designed for me...”

Expanded comparative discussion

Jane Austen and Kamala Das reflect historically contingent strategies of confessional writing. Austen’s mediation arises from the socio-cultural restrictions of early nineteenth-century England; Das’s direct first-person voice emerges from post-colonial India, where societal and patriarchal pressures intersect with the legacy of colonialism. Despite these differences, both employ confession as a

strategic literary instrument for asserting epistemic authority and validating female consciousness.

Austen's ethical introspection demonstrates that interiority can be a moral and social resource, while Das's radical confession shows that interiority can be a tool of a resistance. Together, they illustrate the continuum of female self-expression, from socially mediated reflection to bold, performative self-revelation.

The Role of Confession in Feminist Literary Discourse

The comparative analysis of Jane Austen and Kamala Das underscores that confession, whether subtle or explicit, functions as:

A site of epistemic authority— Women assert their right to narrate interior experience.

A tool of moral and ethical reflection— Austen's confession mediates thought through ethical frameworks.

A mode of resistance— Das's confession challenges patriarchal and societal silencing.

A vehicle for embodied and linguistic autonomy— Das reclaims body and language as instruments of self-expression.

These overlapping functions demonstrate the evolution and adaptability of confessional modalities, illustrating their continuing relevance in feminist literary studies.

Conclusion

This study presents that Jane Austen and Kamala Das exemplify the diverse strategies through which women writers reclaim interiority. Austen's mediated confession emphasizes moral deliberation and ethical introspection, navigating societal constraints, while Das's explicit, radical confession foregrounds desire, bodily autonomy, and linguistic self-expression.

By situating their works in dialogue, this present paper highlights the historical evolution and transformative potential of confessional writing. Confession, whether mediated or explicit, functions as a literary and ethical instrument through which women assert narrative authority, negotiate patriarchal power, and reclaim

the epistemic and moral space of interiority. The study underscores the enduring significance of confessional modalities as central to feminist literary discourse.

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