



# From Communal Lament To Confessional Voice: Women's Emotional Expression In Folk And Modern Indian Literature

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## ABSTRACT

Literature has long functioned as a space where human emotions, cultural values, and social realities are expressed and preserved. Women's experiences, in particular, have found representation in literature through different forms and traditions across time. This paper examines the transformation of women's voices from collective moral expression in folk literature to personal and psychological articulation in confessional poetry. By comparing *Silappathikaram*, a classical Tamil folk epic, with selected poems of Kamala Das, a prominent confessional poet, the study explores how women's grief, suffering, and identity are expressed in distinct literary modes. While folk literature presents women's emotions within moral and social frameworks, confessional literature foregrounds individual truth and emotional honesty. The paper highlights how both traditions, despite their differences, serve as powerful modes of resistance against patriarchal structures. This comparative analysis reveals the continuity of women's struggle for voice and agency across historical and cultural contexts.

**Keywords:** Folk Literature, Confessional Poetry, Women's Voice, Grief, Identity, Resistance

## INTRODUCTION

Literature is widely regarded as a mirror of society, reflecting human experiences, emotions, and social realities. It not only records the cultural and moral values of an age but also gives voice to those who are often silenced within social structures. From ancient oral traditions to modern literary movements, literature has served as a medium through which individuals and communities express their collective and personal truths. Women's writing, in particular, occupies a significant space in literary history, as it reveals the evolving conditions of female existence across time.

In traditional societies, women's experiences were often represented through collective narratives that emphasised moral values and social order. Folk literature, emerging from oral traditions, reflects the shared beliefs and ethics of a community. In contrast, modern confessional literature prioritises personal experience and psychological depth, allowing writers to articulate individual emotions without moral constraints. This shift from communal expression to personal revelation marks an important transformation in women's literary voices.

This article undertakes a comparative study of folk literature and confessional literature through *Silappathikaram* and the poetry of Kamala Das. By examining these texts, the paper seeks to understand how women's grief and identity are shaped by literary form, cultural context, and historical period.

## FOLK LITERATURE AND COLLECTIVE FEMALE VOICE

literature originates from the collective experiences of a community and is transmitted across generations through oral tradition. It reflects social values, moral codes, and cultural beliefs. In folk narratives, characters often function as symbolic figures rather than psychologically complex individuals. Women in such texts are frequently portrayed as embodiments of virtue, sacrifice, and moral authority.

The Tamil epic *Silappathikaram*, attributed to Ilango Adigal, draws heavily from folk tradition and cultural memory. The central character, Kannagi, represents chastity, justice, and moral righteousness. Her suffering is not treated as a private emotional experience but as a collective moral event. The wrongful execution of her husband Kovalan leads to her intense lament, which ultimately results in the destruction of Madurai.

Kannagi's grief functions as a form of moral resistance. Her voice challenges royal injustice and restores ethical balance within society. However, her power is conditional upon her chastity and moral purity. Folk literature thus allows women to speak, but within socially sanctioned frameworks. While Kannagi is empowered, her voice remains tied to communal values rather than personal desire or psychological conflict.

## CONFESSIONAL LITERATURE AND PERSONAL TRUTH

Confessional literature represents a significant departure from collective moral expression. Emerging in the modern period, this literary mode foregrounds the individual self and prioritises emotional honesty. Confessional writing brings private experiences into the public domain, allowing writers to articulate inner conflicts, desires, and vulnerabilities.

Kamala Das stands as a major figure in Indian confessional poetry. Her poems openly explore themes of love, marriage, sexuality, and identity. Unlike Kannagi, Kamala Das does not represent an idealised moral figure. Instead, she presents herself as a questioning and fragmented individual seeking emotional truth.

In poems such as "*An Introduction*", Kamala Das asserts her right to self-expression by rejecting imposed gender roles and linguistic expectations. Her use of personal voice challenges patriarchal norms and literary conventions. Similarly, "*The Old Playhouse*" exposes the emotional suffocation experienced by women within marriage, portraying domestic space as a site of oppression.

Confessional poetry allows women to articulate experiences that were traditionally silenced or moralised. Desire, loneliness, and frustration are expressed without symbolic elevation or ethical justification. Through emotional exposure, Kamala Das transforms personal suffering into literary resistance.

## COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

A comparative reading of folk and confessional literature reveals both contrast and continuity in women's literary expression. Folk literature presents women's suffering as morally meaningful only when aligned with social ideals. Confessional literature, on the other hand, values personal truth over communal approval. While Kannagi's grief restores social justice, Kamala Das's confessions question the very structures that defi morality.

Despite these differences, both forms function as modes of resistance. Kannagi challenges injustice through moral authority, while Kamala Das resists patriarchal control through emotional honesty. Both voices expose the limitations imposed on women and assert agency within their respective contexts.

This comparison highlights the evolution of women's voices from collective representation to individual selfhood. It also demonstrates that women's literature, regardless of form or period, remains deeply connected to the struggle for identity, dignity, and expression.

## CONCLUSION

Literature provides a powerful space for understanding women's experiences across time and culture. Through the comparative study of *Silappathikaram* and Kamala Das's confessional poetry, this article has examined the transformation of women's voices from moral grief to personal truth. While folk literature encodes women's emotions within collective values, confessional literature fore grounds individual identity and psychological depth.

Both traditions reveal the persistent presence of women's resistance within patriarchal societies. By giving voice to grief, desire, and suffering, women writers transform personal and collective pain into meaningful literary expression. This study affirms that women's voices, whether rooted in tradition or modernity, remain central to the understanding of literature as a human and cultural expression.

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