
Narrating Anxiety: Women's Mental Health, Trauma Repetition, and Resistance in Meena Kandasamy's *Exquisite Cadavers*

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Abstract

This paper analyses Meena Kandasamy's *Exquisite Cadavers* (2019) as a narrative of women's mental health, focusing on protagonist Maya's anxiety amid trauma, precarity, and resistance. Drawing on Cathy Caruth's "unclaimed experience," Juliet Mitchell's feminist psychoanalysis, and Louise Rosenblatt's reader-response theory, it examines how childhood abandonment repeats in Maya's relationships and how patriarchal structures produce her distress. The novel's fragmented form mirrors traumatic temporality while offering bibliotherapeutic potential through reader identification and politicized validation of gendered suffering.

Keywords: Meena Kandasamy, *Exquisite Cadavers*, trauma theory, feminist psychoanalysis, bibliotherapy, anxiety, repetition compulsion, women's mental health, reader-response theory

Introduction

Women's mental health has emerged as a crucial site of inquiry within contemporary feminist literary studies, especially in relation to trauma, anxiety, and everyday structures of oppression. Meena Kandasamy's *Exquisite Cadavers* (2019) offers a formally experimental yet deeply intimate narrative of a mixed-race woman, Maya, and her Tunisian husband Karim,

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negotiating love, precarious labour, racism, and political unrest in London. The text's split-page structure, where a central fictional narrative is framed by marginal authorial notes, foregrounds fragmentation as both an aesthetic and psychological condition. In particular, Maya's recurring anxieties—about abandonment, pregnancy, work, and belonging—provide a fertile site for reading the novel through the lens of women's mental health and trauma repetition. This paper examines how *Exquisite Cadavers* narrates anxiety as a gendered and racialised experience while simultaneously carving out spaces of resistance and self-fashioning for its protagonist. Drawing on Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, the study explores how past trauma—especially childhood abandonment and fraught paternal relationships—echoes through Maya's adult life as repetition compulsion, shaping her intimate relationships and self-perception.

Caruth's insight that traumatic experience remains "unprocessed and unintegrated, leaving the individual with a sense of disconnection and fragmentation" is particularly relevant to understanding Maya's narrative trajectory. The trauma of her father's abandonment was not fully assimilated at the moment it occurred; instead, it returns belatedly through her anxiety about Karim's potential departure, her compulsive quarrels, and her fear of repeating cycles of inadequate parenting. This "gap between the event and its recognition" produces Maya's fragmented subjectivity and structures the novel's experimental form.

At the same time, the novel resists pathologising its protagonist. Informed by Juliet Mitchell's feminist psychoanalysis, this paper situates Maya's distress within wider structures of patriarchy, racism, and precarity. Mitchell's groundbreaking work in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974) argued that women's psychological experiences, including anxiety, hysteria, and fragmentation are not signs of inherent female weakness but reflections of patriarchal culture itself. Mitchell challenged the notion of "innate psychological differences between men and women," instead focusing on "how social structures and power dynamics shaped the feminine psyche." By applying Mitchell's framework, this paper reads Maya's anxiety not as individual pathology but as a symptom of gendered oppression, economic insecurity, and the legacy of colonial and racial hierarchies. Furthermore, this study engages with reader-response theory and bibliotherapy to explore how *Exquisite Cadavers* functions not only as a representation of women's mental health struggles but also as a potentially therapeutic text for readers. Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory emphasizes the "interaction between the reader's personal interpretation and the text's meaning," distinguishing between efferent reading (focused on information extraction) and aesthetic reading (which engages emotions and personal interpretations). In aesthetic reading, "the reader transacts with a literary text during the reading process, focusing on the aesthetic response while reading," creating space for emotional engagement, identification, and reflection.

Bibliotherapy, the practice of using literature to support psychological healing, builds on this transactional model by positioning reading as an active process through which readers can gain insight into their own experiences, develop empathy, and find language for previously unnameable feelings. When applied to *Exquisite Cadavers*, this framework suggests that readers, particularly women navigating similar experiences of anxiety, trauma, and

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precarity, may find in Maya's story a mirror for their own fragmented selves and a vocabulary for articulating distress. The novel's refusal of linear narrative and its inclusion of marginal authorial commentary invite readers into a collaborative meaning-making process, resisting passive consumption and encouraging critical reflection on the social conditions that produce women's mental distress.

The article has four major aims: first, to contextualise *Exquisite Cadavers* within Kandasamy's wider spectrum of writing on violence, trauma, and resistance; second, to provide a brief summary of the narrative and a focused character analysis of Maya and Karim; third, to review the existing criticism on the novel and on Kandasamy's treatment of trauma, integrating Caruth's trauma theory, Mitchell's feminist psychoanalysis, and reader-response, bibliotherapy frameworks; and finally, to offer a close content analysis of how anxiety, trauma repetition, and resistance are formally and thematically constructed in the text. Through this, the paper argues that Kandasamy's narrative not only represents women's mental health struggles but also models a resistant, politicised way of understanding and narrating them and potentially offers readers a bibliotherapeutic encounter that validates and contextualises their own experiences of gendered distress.

Character Analysis

Exquisite Cadavers focuses on Maya, a mixed-race British woman working precariously for a liberal newspaper, and Karim, a Tunisian filmmaker living in London. They share a small apartment, face financial worries, binge-watch movies, and navigate a relationship that is both tender and conflictual, overshadowed by personal and geopolitical histories. Maya's life is shaped by an errant father, unstable jobs, a chain-smoking habit, and an unexpected pregnancy, while Karim carries the "starry-eyed dreams of the Arab Revolution" and the burden of an unjustly arrested brother in Tunis. The narrative unfolds in fragmented vignettes, often moving abruptly between domestic scenes, arguments, moments of intimacy, and the looming possibility of Karim leaving for Tunisia when his brother disappears. Parallel to this central narrative, the margins of the page contain Kandasamy's self-reflexive notes, linking the fictional story to her own life, political events, and writing process. This dual structure blurs the boundary between fiction and life-writing, foregrounding how any narrative of love and anxiety is entangled with history, media, and memory.

Maya: Anxiety, Fragmentation, and Ambivalent Resistance

Maya's character is consistently depicted as intense, emotionally volatile, and acutely self-aware, traits that several reviewers link to unresolved childhood trauma and mixed-race identity conflicts. She experiences her father's abandonment as an enduring wound, returning repeatedly in her thoughts and shaping her fear that all forms of love will ultimately desert her. This repetition of abandonment scripts her interactions with Karim: she quarrels with him as a way of testing the solidity of their marriage, using conflict as reassurance that the relationship still exists. "Her mother had left them when she was too young to remember the precise nature of the entanglement-untanglement, and Maya has convinced herself over the years her mother's leaving and her death shortly thereafter were somehow her fault

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(Kandasamy, 18). Through the lens of Caruth's trauma theory, Maya's fixation on her father's absence can be understood as an "unclaimed experience", a traumatic event that was "not fully experienced at the moment of occurrence but returns later in symptoms such as flashbacks" and intrusive thoughts. Maya's childhood abandonment was so overwhelming that it could not be integrated into her conscious narrative at the time; instead, it resurfaces in adulthood through her compulsive testing of Karim's loyalty, her difficulty trusting intimacy, and her fear of becoming a mother who might abandon or fail her child.

Maya's anxieties cluster around three main nodes, family (father and potential motherhood), work, and intimacy. Her unstable job and zero-hours contract intensify her sense of precarity and self-doubt, contributing to an internal narrative of not being "enough" or "secure". Her sudden pregnancy, coming at a time of political uncertainty and emotional instability, heightens her panic and vulnerability, particularly when Karim's possible departure for Tunis threatens to repeat the pattern of male absence in her life. Applying Mitchell's feminist psychoanalysis, Maya's anxiety and emotional intensity are not simply personal feelings but reflect the internalization of patriarchal structures. Mitchell argued that women's psychological distress often stems from the contradictory demands placed on them under patriarchy: to be nurturing yet independent, sexually desirable yet morally restrained, emotionally available yet professionally competent. Maya embodies these contradictions: she struggles to balance her creative ambitions with precarious work, her desire for intimacy with her fear of dependence, and her intellectual independence with her emotional needs. Her "hysterics' discourse", expressed through quarrels, self-questioning, and emotional outbursts, can be read as a form of resistance to the impossible subject-position assigned to her as a mixed-race woman in a patriarchal, racist society. Yet, even in her most anxious states, Maya is not simply a victim: she thinks critically, reads the world politically, and struggles to articulate her needs, marking her as a character whose mental health struggles are inseparable from her critical consciousness.

Karim: Stability, Risk, and Political Desire

Karim, plays a crucial role in the configuration of Maya's mental landscape. He is often read as the more "stable and consistent" presence in Maya's life; his emotional steadiness contrasts with her volatility. However, his political commitments and family obligations in Tunisia also mark him as a figure of risk and potential loss. When his brother is wrongfully arrested in Tunis, Karim's desire to return and support him confronts Maya with a painful choice between following him into uncertainty or remaining in London, tied to her own history and fragile sense of home. From Maya's perspective, Karim is both anchor and threat: he provides emotional security in the present while embodying the possibility of future abandonment. This duality feeds her anxiety and repetition compulsion, as she cycles through fantasies of being left, of choosing or refusing to follow, and of repeating her father's absence through Karim's departure. In Caruth's terms, Karim's potential departure reactivates the original trauma of paternal abandonment, not as a conscious memory but as an unassimilated fear that structures Maya's present emotional life.

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Trauma Theory and the Concept of “Unclaimed Experience”

Cathy Caruth’s trauma theory, developed most fully in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), provides a crucial framework for understanding how trauma functions in narrative and memory. Caruth defines trauma as “an experience that is so overwhelming and disruptive that it cannot be fully assimilated into the individual’s consciousness.” Instead of being processed as a normal memory, trauma remains “unprocessed and unintegrated, leaving the individual with a sense of disconnection and fragmentation.” Central to Caruth’s theory is the idea that trauma is characterized by belatedness, the phenomenon whereby “the trauma remains ‘unclaimed’ because it is not fully experienced at the moment of occurrence but returns later in symptoms such as flashbacks or nightmares. According to Cathy Caruth, trauma is not limited to the initial painful event in a person’s past, but emerges from the fact that the experience is not fully understood at the time and continues to resurface and disturb the survivor afterward. Caruth’s framework has been widely applied in literary studies to analyze texts that represent war, violence, and personal catastrophe. Her emphasis on trauma’s resistance to narrative coherence helps explain why many trauma narratives are fragmented, non-linear, and experimental in form. The “gap between the event and its recognition” that Caruth identifies corresponds to formal gaps, silences, and ruptures in trauma literature. Applied to *Exquisite Cadavers*, Caruth’s theory illuminates Maya’s repetitive return to memories of her father and her inability to move forward from this childhood wound. The novel’s fragmented structure, its split pages, abrupt shifts, and refusal of linear chronology mirror the temporal dislocation characteristic of traumatic memory. Maya’s anxiety is not simply about the present but about the unassimilated past that constantly intrudes into her current relationships.

Feminist Psychoanalysis and Women’s Mental Health

Juliet Mitchell’s feminist psychoanalysis offers a complementary framework for understanding how gender and patriarchy shape women’s psychological experiences. In her landmark work *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974), Mitchell sought to “reconcile psychoanalysis and feminism at a time when many considered them incompatible.” Against feminist critics who rejected Freud as irredeemably misogynistic, Mitchell argued that psychoanalysis could be reclaimed as a tool for feminist critique. Mitchell’s key insight was that psychoanalytic concepts like the Oedipus complex, castration anxiety, and hysteria should be read not as descriptions of innate female psychology but as analyses of how patriarchal culture produces gendered subjectivity. She rejected the notion of innate psychological differences between men and women, instead focusing on “how social structures and power dynamics shaped the feminine psyche.” Mitchell saw “Freud’s asymmetrical view of masculinity and femininity as reflecting the realities of patriarchal culture, and sought to use his critique of femininity to critique patriarchy itself.” In her collaborative work *Feminine Sexuality* (1982), Mitchell, influenced by Lacanian thought, argued that “fantasy rather than fact determines gender.” This emphasis on the psychic internalization of social structures allows feminist critics to understand women’s anxiety, depression, and fragmentation not as individual pathology but as responses to contradictory

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and oppressive gender norms. Mitchell's framework is crucial for analyzing *Exquisite Cadavers* because it allows us to read Maya's anxiety as structurally produced rather than individually caused. Her emotional volatility, her difficulty with intimacy, and her fear of motherhood are not signs of personal weakness but symptoms of the impossible demands patriarchy places on women. The novel thus becomes a feminist critique of the social conditions that produce women's mental distress, rather than a case study of an individual woman's dysfunction.

Reader-Response Theory and Bibliotherapy

Reader-response theory, particularly the transactional model developed by Louise Rosenblatt, shifts critical attention from the text itself to the interaction between text and reader. Rosenblatt distinguished between efferent reading (reading to extract information) and aesthetic reading, reading that engages emotions, memories, and personal meanings. In aesthetic reading, the reader transacts with a literary text during the reading process, focusing on the aesthetic response while reading. After reading, the reader reflects on the aesthetic response and compares it to the textual evidence and other interpretations. Rosenblatt's theory promotes the transaction between the reader and the text. Each reader extracts his or her own unique meaning from the text. This approach recognizes that meaning is not fixed within the text but emerges through the reader's active engagement, shaped by their personal experiences, emotions, and social location. Bibliotherapy builds on this transactional foundation by positioning reading as a therapeutic practice. Through identification with characters, readers can gain insight into their own emotional struggles, develop empathy, find language for previously unnameable feelings, and experience catharsis. Bibliotherapy is particularly relevant to feminist literary criticism because it emphasizes how reading can validate women's experiences, counter isolation, and provide models of resistance and resilience.

Applied to *Exquisite Cadavers*, these frameworks suggest that the novel functions not only as a representation of women's mental health struggles but also as a potentially healing text for readers navigating similar experiences. The novel's experimental form, particularly its marginal notes that break the fictional frame and connect Maya's story to broader political and personal contexts, invites readers into an active, collaborative meaning-making process. Readers are encouraged to reflect on their own experiences of anxiety, trauma, and precarity alongside Maya's, creating space for recognition, validation, and critical insight. Recent criticism on *Exquisite Cadavers* foregrounds its experimentation with form and its exploration of identity fragmentation in Maya. An article published in the *International Journal of Innovative Research in Technology (IJIRT)* emphasizes how Maya's mixed-race heritage, childhood trauma, and contemporary political pressures produce a fractured sense of self, where past violence echoes persistently in the present. The author explicitly uses the language of repetition compulsion to describe how Maya repeatedly revisits her childhood trauma and anxieties, signaling her struggle to move forward and form a cohesive sense of self.

The IJIRT study notes that the protagonist's fragmented identity, stemming from her mixed-race heritage and traumatic childhood experiences, serves as a focal point for examining broader themes of alienation, cultural displacement, and the quest for self-

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understanding. The article reads the novel's abrupt shifts in time and perspective as formal correlates of Maya's fragmented psyche, noting that repetition of certain memories and anxieties prevents her from forming a cohesive self. Reviews on blogs and online magazines highlight the novel's innovative layout, central narrative surrounded by marginalia, as a visual representation of the protagonist's attempt to keep herself "to the margins" while still being the emotional centre of the story. Critics have also noted Maya's "intense and needy" disposition and the way her emotional demands strain the relationship with Karim, linking these traits to her unresolved sense of abandonment and insecurity.

Trauma, Violence, and Resistance in Meena Kandasamy's Wider Work

Critics of Meena Kandasamy's earlier fiction, especially *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*, frequently note her stark depiction of domestic abuse and its psychological repercussions for women. Scholars describe her portrayal of cyclical violence, emotional isolation, and the normalization of suffering that erode a woman's sense of self until writing becomes a mode of resistance and recovery. Other readings interpret her fiction as feminist manifestos that articulate resilience and the reclamation of feminine subjectivity in defiance of patriarchal control. Although *Exquisite Cadavers* unfolds in a distinct context, a London-based intercultural marriage, the novel echoes Kandasamy's sustained attention to trauma, mental illness, and feminist defiance. Critics such as those writing in *IJIRT* suggest that her fiction "deconstructs trauma and violence" while asserting agency against intersecting oppressions of caste, race, and gender. This broader critical lens frames Maya's anxiety not as an individual disorder but as an expression of systemic, gendered, and racialized trauma recurring across Kandasamy's oeuvre.

Repetition Compulsion and the Return of Abandonment

Maya's recurring preoccupation with her father's childhood abandonment shapes both her fractured identity and her adult relationships. According to trauma theorist Cathy Caruth, traumatic experiences often elude full comprehension at the moment of impact and return belatedly as intrusive symptoms such as flashbacks or obsessive thoughts. Maya's fixation on abandonment exemplifies what Caruth identifies as the "unclaimed experience": a trauma that remains unassimilated and resurfaces through repetition rather than recollection. The novel's fragmented structure, its abrupt temporal shifts, and disjointed scenes mirror this non-linear temporality of trauma. Instead of progressing chronologically, Maya's narrative oscillates between memory and the present, staging the indelible presence of the past in the fabric of the now. Her quarrels with Karim become enactments of *repetition compulsion*, the psychoanalytic process through which survivors unconsciously recreate earlier wounds as a means of mastery. These reenactments entrap her in an anxious cycle, revealing how unintegrated trauma can dominate present relations. Caruth's framework thus reframes Maya's distress as symptomatic rather than moral or emotional weakness. The "gap between event and recognition" situates her life in a continual aftermath, and Kandasamy's experimental form, divided pages and open-ended structure, ethically reflects this state of suspended resolution.

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Anxiety, Precarity, and Feminist Psychoanalysis

Maya's psychological fragility also stems from her material circumstances as a woman of color navigating economic precarity and interpersonal uncertainty. Her unstable zero-hours contract compounds emotional insecurity, reflecting what might be termed *structural anxiety*. Juliet Mitchell's feminist psychoanalytic theory elucidates this dynamic: women's mental unrest arises not from inherent deficiency but from patriarchal contradictions that demand impossible balances between caregiving and independence, emotional vulnerability and professional ambition. In this light, Maya's anxious self-scrutiny and fear of inadequacy are expressions of the social contradictions that configure female subjectivity. Her mixed-race position in London further complicates her identity, challenging her sense of belonging across cultural boundaries. Mitchell's insight – that women's psychic structures are inseparable from sociopolitical power relations – helps recast Maya's emotional turbulence as socially produced rather than innately neurotic. Feminist mental health research reinforces that women of color engaged in precarious labor face intensified pressures leading to anxiety and depression. Kandasamy's depiction of Maya's distress, thus, functions as social critique: the novel encourages readers to interpret anxiety as a rational response to structural injustice, not as individualized pathology.

Pregnancy and the Body as an Anxiety Site

Maya's unplanned pregnancy heightens existing fears and becomes a key pivot in the narrative. Her ambivalence toward motherhood stems from her unresolved paternal trauma and fear of repeating cycles of neglect. Feminist psychology has long associated such ambivalence with patriarchal ideologies that idealize motherhood while denying women adequate support. Through this lens, Maya's anxiety about becoming a "bad mother" reflects the internalization of contradictory patriarchal discourses surrounding female reproduction. Caruth's notion of traumatic repetition resurfaces here: Maya fears reproducing her father's absence, either through emotional incapacity or circumstantial separation. The pregnant body becomes an embodied site where historical wounds resurface in present fears, linking personal trauma to intergenerational repetition. Kandasamy thereby insists that women's reproductive experiences are inseparable from the social and emotional structures that sustain or destabilize them.

Resistance Through Thought, Speech, and Form

Despite her mental turmoil, Maya demonstrates intellectual resistance. Her continual self-analysis and her relationship with Karim manifest her refusal to acquiesce to patriarchal expectations. From a bibliotherapeutic standpoint, this articulation of distress has healing potential: by voicing rather than internalizing pain, Maya models how thought and language can transform passive suffering into critical engagement. Louise Rosenblatt's reader-response theory offers a productive interpretive frame here. Her concept of "transactional reading" describes how readers interact emotionally and intellectually with a text. Readers who share Maya's experiences of anxiety or racial displacement may find affirmation through identification, discovering political meaning in their emotional resonance with her story. On a formal level, Kandasamy enacts resistance by disrupting conventional narrative

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expectations. Her use of marginal commentary – juxtaposing personal narrative with global crises – refuses the self-contained confessional mode often imposed on women’s writing. This fragmentation resists closure and mirrors the incompleteness of ongoing trauma. Through Mitchell’s feminist lens, the technique becomes an act of defiance against the narrative order that demands coherence and redemption from women’s stories.

Narration Style

Rosenblatt’s notion of *aesthetic reading*, which centers the reader’s emotional engagement, clarifies the novel’s therapeutic potential. *Exquisite Cadavers* invites readers to participate actively in meaning-making by navigating its dual-column structure. This process resembles therapy itself – an attempt to piece together fragmented experiences to achieve understanding without needing complete closure. Readers often describe powerful identification with Maya’s fears of loss and displacement. Such encounters can foster psychological relief by normalizing shared feelings of anxiety and by situating distress within wider political and cultural conditions. In doing so, the novel offers readers language and frameworks for understanding their emotions without reducing them to personal flaws.

Conclusion

Exquisite Cadavers extends Kandasamy’s long-standing engagement with trauma, violence, and feminist resistance into a diasporic context. Maya’s anxiety, shaped by early abandonment, racial hybridity, and capitalist precarity, illuminates how personal distress intersects with structural inequity. Caruth’s trauma theory reveals the persistence of “unclaimed” wounds, while Mitchell’s feminist psychoanalysis situates that pain within patriarchal contradictions. Together, these frameworks show that Kandasamy’s fragmented narrative form mirrors the dislocations of trauma itself. When read through Rosenblatt’s bibliotherapeutic lens, the text functions not just as representation but as potential intervention. Its open structure invites empathetic engagement, enabling readers – especially women – to recognize their experiences in Maya’s story and to reinterpret their distress as politically meaningful. In presenting anxiety as a response to systemic violence rather than private failure, Kandasamy’s novel transforms literary space into one of recognition, resistance, and collective understanding.

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