

## **The Multitudes Within: A Thematic Analysis of Anita Nahal's Poetry in *What's Wrong with Us Kali Women?* and *Hey...Spilt milk is Spilt, Nothing Else***

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**Introduction:** The poetry of Anita Nahal reflects on myriad themes, experiences and life in general. A close reading of her poetry would reveal that they were impacted by experiences she drew from the various roles she took during her own life - citizen, immigrant, academician and single mother and also her travels throughout the world. Anita Nahal has authored four poetry collections and co-edited three anthologies, besides making her contributions to children's literature and flash fiction. She was nominated for the Pushcart Prize in 2022 and her poems have been widely anthologized.

This paper attempts to analyse Nahal's poetry in two anthologies: *What is Wrong With Us Kali Women* (2021) and *Hey, Spilt Milk is Spilt, Nothing Else* (2018). As a contemporary diasporic Indian woman poet, Nahal engages with themes like racism, sexism, ageism, mental health, immigration, poverty, domestic violence, and the environment, among others. She writes about the endless injustices that abound all over the world.

The titles of both these collections reflect a great deal of optimism. *Hey... Spilt Milk is Spilt, Nothing Else* (2018) takes an uneventful incident and turns it into a metaphor that philosophizes life. The title invites curiosity and instantly reminds us to accept things as they are; instead of crying over spilt milk, one needs to push towards accepting the outcome and moving forward with their life. It is crucial to open up to new opportunities and calmly put our faith in the cycle of life as Gwendolyn Scotton Bethea succinctly observes in her review of the

book: “Nahal has an unusual ability to take a metaphor like “spilt milk” and settle our souls into a calm acceptance of the inevitabilities of our lives. Yet, she encourages and challenges us to create and believe in new opportunities for life, love, and laughter” (4).

Nahal loves to combine words with images and she has creatively included pencil sketches to graphically enhance the poems. *What’s Wrong with Us Kali Women?* is an evocation of the age-old mythology of goddess Kali, her fierce appearance, prowess and overall energy for which she stands. Kali as a noun and adjective has two principal connotations in the Indian culture: a) It refers to the goddess Kali and the legends associated with her and b) It literally refers to a woman who is dark-skinned (mostly in a negative way). By asking this question for the title of her book, Nahal has expanded the word to encapsulate not only powerful women but all people from marginalised communities who face discrimination – racial or for being too liberal. She rings the bell for equality and social justice loudly by summoning the unabashed energy signified by goddess Kali:

We are the *Kali* women.

And all other female, male, androgynous gods.

We don’t distinguish.

We seek...

Between screams and footsteps pining for justice denied.

Justice battered.

Justice flagged

Murdered. Burned.

Their dark skin, their gender, religion, their sandals blood stained, their clothes drenched (Nahal, *What’s Wrong*, 15).

### A Call Against “-isms”

“Would you like to try on my Hat Please” ((Nahal, *Hey, Split Milk*, 19) is a poem where Nahal pens down the difficulties of being an immigrant. The poet’s voice resonates with those of all immigrants who are inferiorized in every possible way. The poet speaks of overcoming these challenges by remaining steadfast and showing determination in the face of adversity.

In the poem, “Divorced Indian Wife” (Nahal, *Hey, Spilt Milk*, 19), the poet emerges as the survivor of a broken marriage. She has managed to transform herself into a self-aware person who is not vulnerable to emotional blackmail anymore. She says, “Dear ex-husband, don’t push for more. I don’t keep my feminism for my classrooms anymore” (34). “Hierarchical Puke” (*Hey, Spilt Milk*, 68) and “Snoot & Snout” (*What’s Wrong*, 55) both address the issue of hierarchy that exists everywhere. The poet acknowledges the need to have ranks to maintain the integrity of institutional structures but shuns the way ranks are misused by strongly calling out red tape and autocracy.

In the poem “Sari” (Nahal, *Hey, Spilt Milk*, 93), she is reminded of her mother as she drapes her mother’s sari: “As I age, I recall her in you, and especially love wearing the ones she gave me, wrapping her grace around me” (93). A mundane object acquired a new depth and meaning here; it is a memory that countless Indians familiar with this sartorial might carry with them, but are unable to express. Her conversation with the personified version of “Blame” (Nahal, *Hey Spilt Milk*, 18) is extremely relatable:

Blame is sitting on the matted daybed outside in the sunny courtyard now, fanning its  
sweat.

It asks for cold water.

As I hand over the glass, managing a crooked smile it whispers,

‘You two keep fighting while I bask in the glory of your lost opportunities’ (18).

The poet/persona gives a soliloquy regarding the innumerable number of biases human beings perpetuate and practice in the poem titled “No Such Thing as an Ideal World” (Nahal, *Hey, Split Milk*, 21). According to her, an ideal world would be one where “abhorrence, bigotry/ “isms” would not wear benign veneers walking among the norm...” (21).

The poem “Democracy in Decline” (Nahal, *What's Wrong*, 36) deals with the fall of democracy in a country that calls itself a developed nation. In a unique soliloquy-like poem “They Say People Need to Unite,” the poet asks the world: “Are we not one people, one species?”(82). She has also written poems on the Covid 19 pandemic in *What's Wrong with Us Kali Women?* clearly stating that human differences need to be set aside in the wake of a pandemic or any similar global catastrophe.

Nahal explores different styles of writings in her poems. Communicating her sensibilities through her poems, she uses prose-poetry and free verse. In *Hey, Spilt Milk is Spilt, Nothing Else*, Nahal deploys a free verse style which makes it convenient for the readers to construe the intense emotions constituting the poems. On the other hand, in *What's Wrong with Us Kali Women?* she engages in prose-poetry to transcend the boundaries presented by the respective genres of prose and poetry.

Holika, Sita and Sati are figures that she imports from the patriarchal and mythological tradition in the poem titled “*Holika, Sita, Sati*” (Nahal, *What's Wrong*, 69) and reiterates their story from a feminist standpoint. The common thread linking these three figures is the element of fire; fire killed two and tested the third. Nahal fiercely overturns the traditional representation and asks three questions for each of these stories: “Why is evil always shown burning, not reforming?.../Why does a woman only have to walk through fire to prove anything?.../ Why does a wife have to sacrifice her life when her husband dies?” (69-70).

In another poem titled “Fire Couldn’t Stop Laughing”, the protagonist faces the same element- fire -which has consumed countless women before her, but this time she becomes a metaphor for countless women as she marches on unflinchingly: “I will walk through you’, I said./ ‘I have no qualms, nor fears./ But will I come out without feelings this time?” (Nahal, *What's Wrong*, 89).

## Major Themes

Some of her significant themes are:

**Racism:** In “Cacophony” (*Hey, Spilt milk*, 9.), Nahal writes about the bigotry that people show towards darker skin tones. Folks murmur and talk in “hushed tones” or make noises every time they see someone who “appears” different on the outside. At the same time, some white folks

tan their skin to look exotic. She also talks about the bias with regard to her colour in India in “Darkie”: “She is quite *sanvali* (dark).../give her lots of milk it might lighten her” (*Hey, Spilt milk*, 26). She plays on the pun of the Hindi word, “*Saaf*,” which translates as clean, however, is also employed to express that someone’s skin is fair/light.

In the poem “What’s Wrong with Us Kali Women?,” Nahal employs mythology to turn the mirror towards the society itself:

My skin is kali, my heart is gold, my soul is a child, cries, laughs, jumps, feelings flow  
like fresh churned cream from cow’s milk.

My skin disgusts you.

Yet you try to tan yours.

My skin disturbs you, yet you find it exotic.

My skin you call *gandi*.

But I am clean. I bathe.

In winters when my skin lightens a bit, you proclaim, I’m looking *saaf*, fair.

I was always clean.

It’s your mind that is dirty. ...

Ma Kali. Ma Kali. Ma Kali. Ma Kali.

Don’t think she’s not watching (15).

Nahal also addresses contemporary racial incidents like the murder of George Floyd that kick-started the Black Lives Matter movement in her poem titled “How Easy it is for a Black Life to be Taken” ( *What’s Wrong*, 17).

**Ageism:** Nahal expresses her struggle to come to terms with the changes that happen in her body through the natural process of ageing. “Dyeing Undying Love of” (Nahal, *Hey, Spilt Milk*, 120) addresses the ritual of colouring one’s hair. Frustrated with the repetition of the activity and the messiness of the ritual, she wants to stop and let her hair grow naturally white. The act

of dyeing her hair acts as a metaphor to remind her to love herself as she is - to age naturally and be more content in life.

Through the poem “Flesh Hanging Loose” (*Hey, Spilt Milk*, 58), Nahal addresses the inevitability of becoming old and accepting it as it is a natural process:

We all will become old  
As there is no way out  
The normal flow of water  
Cannot be reversed  
And yet some merrily  
Go along destroying  
Their own path (58).

The poet had seen a glimpse of old age in her grandmother: As a child, I would stroke, the wrinkles on my grandmother’s hand, mesmerized by the softness of the folds, /And the way they lay like immaculate ripples of water on dry sands./ Wise. Knowing. A bit sad. A bit mocking (“Grandmother’s Wrinkles,” *Hey Spilt milk*, 79).

**Mental Health :** “Claustrophobia” (Nahal, *What’s Wrong with*, 83) deals with the fragmentary nature of belonging to two lands at once. Prior to leaving India, Nahal’s protagonist and her son sought shelter in Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Delhi, for a few days before shifting elsewhere (*What’s Wrong with*, 66). While looking at the beautiful pictures of the ashram much later in life, the poet-persona recalls the time she was staying there - hurt, anxious, multitasking. An ashram, a place of relaxation, is juxtaposed with the worries in the poet’s mind –what next?

The Covid 19 Pandemic was a time when the importance of mental health shot to focus: “ I suppose the news of their bodies being quickly driven away by body collectors in hazmat suits,/ Never to be seen by their loved ones again made me cry more for their clothes and bedsheets that their loved ones would never see them in again.”(“What Happened to Their Clothes,” *What’s Wrong with*, 18).

**Women:** In “Maryada and Modern *Draupadi*” (Nahal, *What’s wrong*, 71), she celebrates womanhood not only for herself but every woman who thinks less of herself: “I want to feel

special when I lay down, unforgettable. /So, I chose to be me./ A woman. Earthy and sensual” (72). She loves and accepts her sexuality and individuality as they are.

She writes about her experience of building a new life in some of the poems, one being, “Fallacy of a Single Immigrant Mother” (Nahal, *What’s Wrong with*, 51). In this poem, she also universalizes the single mother/parent experience by making it clear that she can do all for a child that a couple may be able to do. She wishes to debunk the “fallacy” that single immigrant mothers are frail, or helpless or cannot raise well-balanced children.

With the title “Avinash” (*indestructible*) (Nahal, *Hey, Spilt milk*, 23) speaking for itself, Nahal displays her resilience in facing the world. She is:

A woman that modernity and tradition, or things with no labels,  
Take turns to visit,  
And I may make a heady mix of various cocktails  
Or simply a bag of non aromatic tea might go down my throat. (23)

One of Nahal’s strongest poems “Feeling Down, Being Down” (Nahal, *What’s Wrong with*, 33 and *Hey, Spilt Milk*, 21), is a spectacular piece on menstruation and the taboos attached to it. The poet questions the logic behind considering the blood impure when the same biological truth is responsible for bringing new life into the world. It concerns her that folks are alone or lonely and depression is a mental challenge that very few, at least in the Eastern world wish to speak about.

“Devi” (Nahal, *Hey, Spilt milk*, 93), overturns the age-old traditions and moral correctness that an Indian woman stands for. Women are also sometimes addressed as Devi in India, though Devi is also a generic name for a goddess, and placed on a pedestal as it is patriarchal convenience to place pressure on a woman to live up to “high moral standards,” of course set by men. In the poem “Devi” Nahal doesn’t want to be called as such. She is a Devi who doesn’t serve at the pleasure of men, and if there is no man in her life, she can survive and thrive: “This Devi aspires/To dream. To live” (22)

**Motherhood :** Nahal has explored the theme of motherhood in two ways. On the one hand, she allows the reader to peek into her relationship with her mother as is vividly expressed in “Mother and her Child”:

Your fingertips with mine  
Your cheek to mine  
The way your eyes look into mine  
The way you lead, I follow...I lead, you follow...  
Connections from soul to soul  
Beyond age, beyond time  
Universe to universe, time over time  
No endings, just beginnings with cycles of love to love  
Even through dimensions unknown (33).

In “I did not say, I love you to my Mama,” her last moments with her mother and her fear of never seeing her again are underlined.

On the other hand, Nahal explores the concept of motherhood through her experience of being a mother. Her poems encapsulate the struggles of single mothers in everyday life where they are subjected to unwarranted questions and mockery. Through her poem, “Fallacy of a Single Immigrant Mom” (*What’s Wrong with*, 51), she depicts the challenges of a single immigrant mother and how she deals with them. However, despite all the struggles and obstacles she had to endure, her unending love for her child is a quintessential example of motherhood as she puts forth in “Why I Usually cry in the Shower” (*What’s Wrong with*, 53):

I cry for lost opportunities,  
Lost relationships, status, family jamborees, cultural sustenance,  
Lost growing romantic-old together, lost years of youth, lost newsflashes and lost  
sentiments that refuse to let go. ..  
I’ll accept it as long as in each time frame my child is born to me again (53).

**Love:** “A Sip of Wine” (Nahal, *What’s Wrong with*, 28), deals with the basic human instinct of desire which consumes people when they are in love:



I seek an illusion of a time long gone.

Bound to delusion, I try to unshackle.

But when a sip or two of wine waltzes down my throat resting and churning with the  
juices in my tummy,

I miss you more than always (28).

In “Tenderly” (*Hey, Spilt Milk*, 26), Nahal talks about the tender love that should exist between a couple. Any kind of “pull/push/hurt” will sever that relationship forever.

The poet eloquently expresses emotions that many might feel when leaving a person they used to love and moving on in their life in the poem, “Fresh Start” (Nahal, *Hey, Spilt Milk*, 37); it is a difficult task. She searches for a justification to write to him and maybe ends up meeting him one last time. But she restrains herself and packs memorabilia attached to him. Finally, the process of letting go is complete just as a “fresh start” knocks at her door.

**Diaspora:** Nahal’s poem “Know Your Wheel, Homo Sapiens” (*What’s Wrong with*, 27) records the trauma of parting from homelands. When migrating, a person suffers from a feeling of loss of home which transforms/questions the notions of the “self,” “other” and singular or collective identity. Throughout the poem “Paying my Debt to Two Lands,” Nahal looks at her past, remembering every small memory constituting her childhood and creating her identity and roots (Nahal, *What’s Wrong with*, 32). However, the depth of Nahal’s poems clearly reflects the complications and beauties of an immigrant migrating to the promised land of “honey, milk and plenty.”

Nahal’s understanding of migration is developed through her personal experiences. For instance, in one of her poems, “Stacking” (*Hey, Spilt milk*, 24) Nahal writes “...three continents, and/many home bases...” appears to be a reference to her own journey across the world where she established multiple home bases with altering cultures, spaces, and people. However, despite her long journey, the yearning for home is conspicuous in the “Migratory Birds” (*Hey, Spilt Milk*, 35) where she writes “I love you, I will miss you, Mamma.” “Migratory Birds” successfully reflects the contradictions faced by an individual while leaving their homelands as she writes “...I know it’s not easy/ I know you wanted to turn back from each

corner, door and road screaming..." (56). These contradictions highlight the aspects of diaspora where immigrants do not necessarily want to return to their homeland, yet roots and people are not forgotten and an unbreakable link remains.

**Human Identity:** Through a number of poems in both her anthologies, Nahal has addressed the ultimate human desire to understand mortality. In "Ancient Creation" (Nahal, *What's Wrong With*, 49) Nahal questions the origins of humans and the possibilities as well:

Who am I to say how we humans were created...

Who am I to say from where I came?

Or you. Or them.

Or any identity chosen or shoved upon us (49).

Towards the end of the same poem, Nahal speaks on behalf of Mother Earth and says, "I blindfolded myself so I would not be biased against any of my children"(49).

**Humanism and Environment:** "Hope" (*What's Wrong With*, 56 and *Hey, Spilt Milk* 71) reinstates the poet's faith in humankind and someday reaching "the promised land." Hope is personified here and is shown as feeling depressed after losing faith in the world. The poet instils courage by evoking Mandela, Martin Luther King and Gandhi. She asks "Hope" to speak up again and again and keep the light burning, even if the abyss seems to be engulfing us all. One cannot abandon hope when the world is failing; the chant should go on.

In "Inconvenience of Poverty," (*Hey, Spilt Milk*, 55) Nahal has tackled the hypocrisy with which charity is practised in our world. It is a guilt-driven act of the privileged population to feel good about themselves. Is the selfless act actually selfless? The poet sees someone familiar roaming the streets in *Homelessness can Happen to Anyone* (Nahal, *Hey, Spilt Milk*, 67) and emotes that although money may provide comfort, no one can predict anyone's fate.

"Earth's Dying Soul" (Nahal, *Hey, Spilt milk*, 76) is a warning to save the environment while we can. Humankind has put extreme pressure on the planet and Earth is dying a slow death:

Please,

Everyone...  
Please move away.  
Just stop it  
Let it rest.  
It's weary  
Let it recover  
Let it (76).

The angst and the helplessness that engulfed humanity when Covid hit, is addressed by the poem "Covid 19s Inverted Triangle" (Nahal, *What's Wrong with*, 42):

When sadness seizes and piles and piles on to Covid19's lunatic inverted triangle.  
When murders, accidents, rapes, war, suicide, civil conflicts, law and order losses,  
And untold diseases vie for double jeopardy during that very Covid19's irrationality.  
When mortgages lay peeved in vaults.  
When vaults are empty.  
When homes are fumigated.  
When poor are dehumanized.  
When animals are terminated.  
When nature is brutalized (42).

She feels frustrated about the situation the world finds itself in and questions the existence of a higher power; faith in love and God is severely tested and the answers remain unclear.

## Conclusion

Nahal's poems clearly have two dimensions - one that revolves around her own turbulent life and then the confusion, bias, injustice and mayhem she sees in the world. By putting into use her distinctive experiences in a thoughtful and empathetic manner, she has undoubtedly painted a large canvas in myriad hues.

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