

Exploring Identity And Dissent In Fatima Bhutto's *The Runaways* And Meena Kandasamy's *Exquisite Cadavers*

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Abstract

The present study explores the thematic similarities between identification and dissent in two modern novels, *Exquisite Cadavers* by Meena Kandasamy and *The Runaways* by Fatima Bhutto. Both writers use different story techniques to show how people fight against political oppression and social conventions. This study attempts to investigate how Bhutto and Kandasamy address themes of resistance, identity, and belonging in the framework of their narratives through a comparative analysis. The study additionally aims to explore how the cultural and socio-political environments influence the paths taken by the characters and how they express opposition. This study adds to the current conversation in modern literature about identity, dissent, and resistance; especially in the context of South Asia and the Middle East. By concentrating on two well-known female writers from the area, the study draws attention to the variety of voices and viewpoints that enhance the literary scene. Furthermore, the comparative approach clarifies the manner in which literature reacts to and reflects intricate socio-political realities, providing insightful perspectives on the human condition and the pursuit of both individual and group liberty.

Keywords: Identity, Dissent, Resistance, Socio-political context

Contemporary literature explores identity, dissent and resistance as a way for authors to tackle the intricacies of the human experience amidst societal and political changes. Two novels, Fatima Bhutto's *The Runaways* and Meena Kandasamy's *Exquisite Cadavers*, are prime examples of this literary exploration. Both authors, hailing from South Asia, offer unique perspectives in their works that transcend geographical boundaries to delve into universal themes of belonging, agency and defiance.

In the novel *The Runaways* tells the story of three young protagonists from different backgrounds, Anita Rose, Monty and Sunny, who find themselves involved in extremism and disillusionment. The novel is set in Pakistan's time of socio-political turmoil, where the characters navigate their identities shaped by cultural, religious and societal expectations. Fatima Bhutto's intricate character development and evocative prose illuminates the struggle for self-discovery amidst the clash between tradition and modernity. The novel highlights the ways in which individuals grapple with their environments limitations while striving for autonomy and authenticity. Similarly, *Exquisite Cadavers* by Meena Kandasamy immerses readers in a labyrinth of narratives within narratives that blur the lines between fiction and reality. The protagonist confronts the limitations of her agency in the face of oppressive systems, and Kandasamy's experimental narrative technique mirrors the fragmented nature of contemporary existence. The novel invites readers to question the construction of identity and the possibility of resistance within a world rife with inequality and injustice. Through a comparative analysis of these two novels, this research aims to unravel the intricate tapestry of identity and dissent, shedding light on how literature reflects and refracts the complexities of human existence in an ever-changing world.

At the heart of *The Runaways* lies the exploration of individual identity amidst the tumultuous landscape of Pakistan. Bhutto weaves the narratives of Anita, Monty, and Sunny, characters who come from different backgrounds but share a common longing for freedom and self-expression. Anita, a young woman from Karachi, struggles with societal expectations and patriarchal norms as she tries to find her own path in a conservative society. Monty, a British-Pakistani teenager from Portsmouth, struggles to reconcile his cultural heritage with his desire for independence. Sunny, a young Pashtun boy is drawn into extremism, grappling with questions of belonging and agency as he navigates the complexities of his environment.

Fatima Bhutto portrays a rich tapestry of identity formation through these diverse perspectives, depicting how individuals negotiate their sense of self within their cultural and social milieus. Anita Rose, her brother Ezra, and mother Zenobia reside in a slum in Karachi. Zenobia's wages as a masseuse provide for the family until Ezra uses what appears to be organised crime to improve their condition in life. It is so ironic that Anita Rose dreams of luxurious life and wants to look like an actress in TV serials but in fact, she has nothing just because of guilt, shame, and an oppressed life: "Anita Rose closed her eyes and tried to imagine herself as one of the women she had seen in the dramas on TV who sat in pink chairs and had their beautiful light-brown hair washed and dried in salons" (9).

Sunny represents the empty, virtually invisible immigrant. A migrant runs the risk of either unthinking assimilation or horrific reincarnation in their quest to re-create themselves and become visible, unless they are successful in establishing a new transnational space. In an attempt to seek recognition and find significance in his background, Sunny, alienated from British culture, becomes an advocate of fundamentalist Islam. According to Nyla Ali Khan "In the character of Sunny, the author portrays the displaced Indian Muslim migrant who, as he gnaws at a new culture, is gnawed by the pressure to fit into his country of adoption, England"(n.p). Monty, who comes from an affluent Sunni Muslim family in Pakistan, has never had to deal with issues of systematic discrimination and demonization of minorities. However, his Christian girlfriend, Anita Rose, also known as Layla, brings up these issues. She introduces him to tremendous poverty that befalls the Pakistani people, violent realities that permeate reality, and radical ideas that blame the privileged and powerful for deceiving the poor.

The three main characters of *Runaways*, Anita Rose, Sunny, and Monty, are absorbed by the extreme Ummah Movement. Anita and Sunny are able to cultivate the dream of a powerful, heroic, and 'authentic' personality because of the Ummah Movement's dissemination of a conservative Islam. But in the realm of prostitution and sex tourism in Pakistan, Layla is just as objectified as she was when she was the face of the pan-Islamic movement. The theme of dissent and resistance against oppressive systems is central to the exploration of identity in *The Runaways*. As the characters navigate the constraints of their environments, they are confronted with the harsh realities of extremism, corruption, and political violence. Anita, Monty, and Sunny each find themselves at odds with the status quo, challenging prevailing norms and ideologies in their quest for autonomy and self-expression. Bhutto portrays the myriad forms of dissent, from subtle acts of defiance to overt acts of rebellion that emerge in response to systemic injustice and inequality. Through her vivid prose and evocative imagery, Bhutto captures the courage and resilience of individuals who dare to question the prevailing order, offering a powerful critique of the social and political forces that seek to silence dissenting voices.

Furthermore, Fatima Bhutto employs a variety of narrative techniques to enhance the exploration of identity and dissent in *The Runaways*. The novel's fragmented structure, shifting perspectives, and nonlinear narrative serve to mirror the fractured nature of contemporary existence, highlighting the complexities of individual identity and the fluidity of experience. By weaving together multiple storylines and narrative threads, Bhutto invites readers to engage with the interconnectedness of personal and political struggles, challenging conventional notions of identity and belonging. Through her masterful storytelling, Bhutto creates a vivid and immersive world that captures the tumultuous spirit of Pakistan's youth, offering a nuanced portrayal of the human quest for freedom and self-determination.

At the core of *Exquisite Cadavers* is Karim's journey as a filmmaker, who struggles to balance his creative vision with the expectations imposed by his tutors. As a Tunisian filmmaker studying in London, Karim grapples with the pressures to conform to Western-centric narratives and storytelling techniques. His struggles with his tutors reflect broader power dynamics within the film industry, where voices from marginalised backgrounds are often marginalized or co-opted into serving the dominant cultural narratives. Through Karim's experiences, Kandasamy sheds light on the challenges faced by diverse artists in asserting their creative autonomy and resisting the homogenising forces of institutionalized art.

Karim is a film director who finds it difficult to capture the reality he wants to convey while being young, married, and in love with each other. The tutors surrounding him gradually modify his story to focus on what they think he should discuss, regardless of how fabricated or cliché it may be, even at the risk of him failing the course. Although Maya, who works for a newspaper, is excited by her newfound freedom and is keenly aware of the domestic environment she now inhabits, she and Karim also have tense ties with their fathers and have been growing more and more irritated with one another as the day today reality of marriage becomes more prevalent. In her review Jennie Godfrey observes that "Maya and Karim's story is a construct of what Meena wants us to read. As Maya and Karim's story moves on, we learn that Karim has his own way of viewing his wife – his knowledge as a filmmaker imbues the way in which he views her too" (n.p).

The theme of dissent against oppressive systems is central to Karim's creative struggle. His attempts to challenge the status quo and subvert dominant narratives are met with resistance and dismissal from his tutors, who seek to mould him into a more palatable version of a successful filmmaker. Karim's insistence on telling stories that are authentic to his own experiences and cultural heritage becomes an act of resistance against the erasure and marginalization of voices from the Global South in the Western-dominated film industry. Kandasamy skilfully captures the tension between artistic integrity and institutional conformity, offering a searing critique of the gatekeeping mechanisms that perpetuate inequality and cultural hegemony within the arts.

Moreover, Maya's narrative in *Exquisite Cadavers* offers a complementary exploration of identity and dissent. As a dual heritage British woman, Maya grapples with questions of belonging and cultural identity in a society that often marginalises or eroticises her experiences. Her interactions with Karim and her own journey of self-discovery parallel his struggles with creative expression, highlighting the interconnectedness of personal and artistic identity. Maya's presence in the novella serves to underscore the broader themes of cultural hybridity and the complexities of navigating multiple identities within a society that seeks to homogenise difference.

Exquisite Cadavers is a profound exploration of identity and dissent through the intersecting narratives of Karim and Maya. Through Karim's struggles as a filmmaker and Maya's quest for self-discovery, Kandasamy invites readers to delve into the complexities of personal and creative expression in the face of societal expectations and institutional constraints. The novella serves as a powerful critique of the homogenizing forces of the film industry and the broader cultural hegemony that marginalizes voices from diverse backgrounds. Through her narrative, Kandasamy creates a nuanced portrait of the challenges faced by artists of marginalized backgrounds in asserting their creative autonomy and resisting the erasure of their cultural heritage. *Exquisite Cadavers* stands as a testament to the enduring power of art to illuminate the complexities of the human experience and inspire hope for a more just and equitable world.

Examining Fatima Bhutto's *The Runaways* and Meena Kandasamy's *Exquisite Cadavers*, it is evident that both novels provide profound insights into the complexities of identity and dissent within the context of socio-political upheaval. By exploring the lives of their respective protagonists, such as Anita, Monty, and Sunny in "The Runaways," and Maya and Karim in "Exquisite Cadavers," Bhutto and Kandasamy navigate the struggles of personal and political turmoil, revealing how individuals navigate their sense of self in chaotic environments.

In *The Runaways*, Bhutto immerses readers in the tumultuous landscape of Pakistan, where the characters grapple with the tensions between tradition and modernity, as well as the allure of extremism in the face of disillusionment. Through intricate character development and evocative prose, Bhutto highlights the struggles of individuals to assert their identity and agency amidst societal expectations and political oppression. In the article "Factors Behind Radicalization: Analysis of Fatima Bhutto's *The Runaways*" Junaid Ashraf views that, "In the novel, Fatima Bhutto has depicted the pathway that leads individuals towards radicalization and the various causes like poverty, religious segregation, social frustration, and identity crisis make individuals become radicalized" (n.p). Similarly, Meena Kandasamy's *Exquisite Cadavers* delves into the fragmented psyche of Maya and Karim as they navigate the complexities of personal and creative expression within a London film school. Using innovative narrative techniques and vivid imagery, Kandasamy captures the struggles of artists from marginalised backgrounds to assert their voice and resist the homogenising forces of institutionalized art. In the review Aida Edemariam observes that, "Kandasamy's truth-bombs are not merely confined to the margins but are poignantly observed in her fiction; where her playful, lyrical nature shines through. There are intimate moments of reflection, digressions like one would expect a singer to make, which allows Kandasamy to segue from song to song, but these are never mere passing thoughts" (n.p.).

Despite the differences in setting and narrative style, both novels offer profound reflections on the nature of dissent and resistance in the face of systemic injustice and inequality. Through their masterful storytelling, Bhutto and Kandasamy encourage readers to confront the complexities of the human condition and envision new possibilities for collective liberation. *The Runaways* and *Exquisite Cadavers* are powerful testaments to the enduring power of literature to illuminate the depths of the human experience and inspire hope for a more just and equitable world. By exploring themes of identity and dissent with nuance and empathy, Fatima Bhutto and Meena Kandasamy offer invaluable insights into the complexities of personal and political struggle, reminding us of the importance of resilience, solidarity, and the pursuit of justice in the face of adversity.

Workscited

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