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Reimagining Identity, Religion, and Nationalism: Exploring Polyphonic Voices in Fatima Bhutto's *The Runaways*

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Abstract

This study analyzes Fatima Bhutto's novel, *The Runaways*, within postmodernist paradigms, particularly how immigration and diasporic identity empower characters in terms of post-9/11 cultural identity. The theory of multiplicity and monologism dissent will be utilized to investigate the polyphonic nature of the novel with diverse voices representing the contentions in the context of recent socio-political settings. The present research intends to examine the intersection between the issues of identity, religion, and nationalism in the changing world. The purpose of the study is to interpret and assess how exactly *The Runaways* challenges certain views about the construction of identity, nationalism, and cultural displacement. The present study engages with wider debates about identity politics in contemporary Pakistani English fiction and the intersections of literature and social-political issues.

Key Words: Cultural Displacement, Diasporic Identity, Identity Politics, Immigration, Monologism and Polyphony, Post-9/11 Cultural Identity, Religion and Nationalism

Introduction

In the chorus of muted voices gripping the literary world at present, Fatima Bhutto enters with her book *The Runaways* (2018), a story that captures today and how identity, religion, and nationalism are ripening in this globalized yet segregated world. *The Runaways* is a tale that stretches from Karachi to Portsmouth, and from there through the West African hinterland; as three young people are transported around these vast unknown surfaces in their struggle for political play – we meet Sunny, Monty, and Anita; each on respective journeys of belonging enfolded into empty lonesomeness. In a world shaped by post-9/11 paranoia and the attempted polyp of cultural difference with religious ideology, Bhutto's stories touch on themes that resonate undercurrents across time – migration (figurative as well as literal), aggression/infiltration/deception from within or without, alienation in never-ending canon foddering for radicalization. In this research, the researchers approach *The Runaways* from a postmodern



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perspective that capitalizes on the theory's concern with fragmented identity, a multiplicity of voices and viewpoints, and the destabilization of grand narratives. It is a polyphonic novel, the distinct voices of each protagonist knitting together to create an overarching narrative about globalized postcolonial identities. By invoking the Particular Mr. K – through his centre surface, what is physical and palpable about him in all his unique detail (a pinstriped suit), Bhutto demonstrates how identity narratives can rupture monolithic conceptions of individual or collective subjectivities as well as dualities such that divide East from West; self from Other; religion against secularity with a capital R. In this way, the multiplicity of discourse in a work echoes Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia. It implies that there are always multiple voices, views, and ideologies existent within a text, which form an opposing or at least essentializing the valuable context of a monological authoritative discourse. And the "language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the coexistence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles, and so forth" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 291). Such as the puzzle to be unraveled is exactly how this celluloid polyphony that we might call *The Runaways* rescripts identity trajectories of religion and nationalism in our present understanding/beliefs about who belongs (and more importantly: does not belong) only adding one dimension further into trying-rewrite a story well underway since before its scholars stopped reporting it passed first hand/hallmarks. Specifically, this study considers how Bhutto constructs her characters' identities as malleable and shattered things that defy easy compartmentalization. In a postmodern paradigm, identity is a contested territory whose contours are defined through complex networks of power relations and discourses: cultural representations, and religious imperatives. Examining the protagonists' complex and split selves, this paper explores Bhutto's challenge to monolithic notions of selfhood in a novel that defines its psychological and ideological battles as those confronting 'modern youth'. The study is guided by the following research questions:

- a) How does the novel, *The Runaways* depict the quest for identity among individuals caught between conflicting cultural and religious forces?
- b) In what ways does the novel's polyphonic structure challenge traditional narratives of nationalism and belonging?
- c) How does the novel reflect postmodern concerns with fragmented identity and the destabilization of grand narratives related to religion and national identity?

The study employs a postmodern lens by delineating how Bhutto's narrative reflects and critiques contemporary problems such as extremism, globalization, and identity politics. This study asserts that in *The Runaways*, the discourses of nation and religion are presented as contested, fluid categories that characters negotiate based on their own experience of alienation at one remove from society or global impasse. Moreover, the study will demonstrate how Bhutto is polyphonic in style and that she uses it to break binary oppositions—in effect advocating a more plural self and ideology.



Literature Review

Some of the newer works of South Asian fiction place the subjects and themes of identity, religion, and nationalism in socio-politically different contexts and geographical locations. As Wilson (2023), posits, "The emergence of polyphonic narratives in contemporary Pakistani fiction marks a decisive shift from singular, monolithic representations to more nuanced explorations of identity" (p. 45). As a result, post-9/11 writers have had to construct an array of complex narrative strategies with the polyphonic voice ultimately enhancing the challenge of the themes of belonging and identity formation in literature. Chambers (2019) notes that "contemporary Muslim writers are increasingly rejecting the East-West dichotomy in favor of more nuanced explorations of cultural hybridity" (p. 67). This observation is particularly valid when doing a general analysis of how writers such as Mohsin Hamid and Kamila Shamsie have contributed in this regard. This is because, as Rahman (2020) also pointed out, "the contemporary Pakistani novel has become a site of resistance against simplified narratives of religious and national identity" (p. 89). Using multiple narrators, and multiple points of view, *The Runaways* employs a distinctive narrative technique. The strategy of representing identity in post-9/11 South Asian literature has shifted from a clear bifrontal model toward a more intricate depiction. Writers have thus shifted from the traditional structuring of world stories where the two poles are sharply defined as East and West or tradition and modernity. According to Mondal (2018) in "Young British Muslim Fiction", contemporary Muslim writers are challenging monolithic representations of Islamic identity through narratives that embrace complexity and contradiction" (p. 67). This shift is best exemplified in novels such as Mohsin Hamid, and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) where the protagonist's metamorphosis/transformation portrays a frantic struggle between national affinity and individuality. The novel also enhances this debate by presenting diverse stories about how identity is constructed by its religious, political, and social worlds. Davidson (2022) points out that, "the use of polyphonic voices in contemporary Pakistani fiction allows for a more nuanced examination of how different characters experience and respond to identity crises" (p. 78) whereas many prior novels might coalesce around the view of one character, the choice of narrative perspective acquires crucial importance when addressing the question of religious extremism, which Bhutto investigates not so much as a manifestation of religious sentiments but as a multifaceted interaction between the individual, society, and politics. The representation of nationalism in the Pakistani postcolonial literature has also had its ideological shift. The traditional nationalist narratives are slowly being challenged by writers who are now looking at "fluid identities" (Hassan, 2021, p. 45) in contemporary Muslim societies. In her multiple narratives, Bhutto explores nationalism, self-identity, religion, and geopolitics in ways that provide a richer understanding of what it means to be a citizen in the post-modern world. As it has been rightly noted that, "contemporary Pakistani fiction reflects the increasingly complex nature of belonging in a globalized world, where national identity becomes just one of many competing loyalties"(Khan, 2020, p. 112). The possibility to consider these issues from different angles is one of the most valuable steps forward regarding the subjects of identity, religion, and nationalism, as are discussed in



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contemporary Pakistani literature. In her use of polyphonic voices, therefore, Bhutto offers a story that is not easily reducible into neat categories by culture or religion, or by the political conflicts between the two, but asks the reader to look at how people build identity and identity politics about the complex forces they experience in the contemporary Middle East. The issue of religious extremism, a topic explored in most works produced after the 9/11 tragedy, is specially addressed in Bhutto's texts. Unlike earlier narratives that might depict radicalization from a certain angle and the characters from a certain angle, *The Runaways* depicts it differently and the characters in it are all pulled in or pushing against radicalization. Said (2019) helps to understand this approach through his concept of "contrapuntal perspectives", where different voices and experiences combine to create a more complete picture of contemporary reality (p. 156). This approach corresponds with current scientific literature where radicalization is seen not as a simple religious extremism but as a reaction to multiple social, political, and psychological factors. In *The Runaways*, having polyphonic voices plays several functions. Firstly, it enables Bhutto to put forward multiple parameters of identity construction without prostrating one over the other. Secondly, it benefits to foster a broader discussion on how religious orientation interconnects with self and national affiliations. Lastly, it offers guidelines for comprehending the means, by which people find themselves navigating between cultural conservatism and the modernity of the present society in the context of globalization. Even though Bhutto covers these themes, her strength is in using multiple voices to discuss these issues. While it is possible that earlier works would have explored just one part of identity, or aspects of religious faith, *The Runaways* shows that all of these areas are connected and interact with each other. The multiplication of tales and the fragmentation of the novel's architecture becomes, therefore, a reflection on the nature of contemporary processes of identity production, where belonging or exclusion does not lend itself to the telling of a single story. Therefore, Bhutto offers a story that is not easily reducible into neat categories by culture or religion, or by the political conflicts between the two, but asks the reader to look at how people build identity and identity politics about the complex forces they experience in the contemporary Middle East.

Theoretical Framework

In *The Runaways*, Bhutto skillfully projects the salient features of postmodernism that discuss disintegrated identity, the devices of master narratives, and the dissolution of different cultures and ideas. The wayward truths and relative realities the characters in Bhutto's novel must negotiate to make it a fitting resting place for an analysis of postmodernism, which is characterized by literature or thought that takes note explicitly apart from the certainty of objective truth. Using post-modern theories of identity fragmentation, simulacra, and irony this paper will explore differing readings through approaches espoused by theorists such as Jean Baudrillard, Frederic Jameson, or Jacques Derrida to demonstrate how *The Runaways* is reflective in a world where simple explanations have vanished. It is true that fragmentation, above all in terms of identity (a central theme of postmodernism), refers to instability. In opposition to the modernist view of a fixed, stable self-concept that



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is rationally formed and defined over time in response to events postmodernism dismisses these claims arguing that our identity is multiple (show different facets), flexible rather than fixed (changes like water) and produced through language & social interactions. Monty, Anita, and Sunny... characters of Bhutto humanizes this identity...the split personality. Every character lives a double life in the liminal space of cultural expectations, societal labels, and personal aspirations. This fragmentation is the post-modern self as described by Frederic Jameson, which he suggests to be a schizophrenic thing in and of itself (shifting. The concept creates one emergent form out of all these images and narratives that are juxtaposed). In *The Runaways*, the characters don't have a solid sense of who they are. They keep changing their identities as they deal with pressures from family, community, and global culture. Monty wants material success, while Anita loves Western pop culture. This shows how they're always rethinking who they are and who they want to be. The result? A broken shaky identity that shows how postmodernism has an impact on them. Jean Ba'udrillard 's idea of simulacra helps us understand how Bhutto shows identity and meaning in a global world. Simulacra are copies without originals. This idea suggests that our modern world is so full of images and symbols that it's hard to tell what's real and what's not. Take Anita, for example. She's crazy about Western pop culture, but her view of the West comes from media and shopping, not real-life experiences. She wants to live a life based on what she sees, not on real interactions. This is what Baudrillard calls hyperreality - where people interact more with images and symbols than with actual touchable reality. The book shows a loss of realness in how it deals with extreme ideas. People like Sunny turn to radical beliefs not because they believe in them, but because they want to find meaning in a world full of images. Bhutto criticizes this modern obsession with identity as an act where who you are often comes from what you see rather than who you are. This reflects the book's modern approach. In modern writing, authors use humor and imitation to challenge big ideas or "main stories"—the big beliefs and myths that societies use to make sense of things. *The Runaways* applies this modern doubt to main stories about culture fitting in, and right and wrong. Through characters who become disappointed with traditional ways of defining who they are and what they believe in, Bhutto pushes readers to think about whether ideas like culture, nationality, and morality still matter in today's connected world. Jacques Derrida's idea of deconstruction—which suggests that language and meaning lack stability and invite different interpretations—fits this situation. Bhutto takes apart the notions of "home" and "self," showing how her characters see these concepts as delicate and always open to new understandings. The text, for instance, brims with irony; it portrays a Western way of life as a route to freedom, yet it causes feelings of alienation due to its unattainability and shallowness. Monty also discovers that his pursuit of success doesn't bring the satisfaction he expected, as the grand story of wealth and status fails to unite his fragmented self. We can interpret Bhutto's examination of radicalism in *The Runaways* through a post-modern perspective as a reaction to the perceived breakdown of meaning in a hyperreal world. People like Sunny gravitate towards extreme ideologies, not because they understand or believe in them, but to regain a sense of purpose in the confusing diversity of post-modern existence. Their pull towards radicalism becomes a way to play with ideology, a post-modern search



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for genuineness that doesn't provide real meaning, as they interact with ideologies that are themselves performative rather than rooted in personal or cultural history. This search for identity through radical means shows a post-modern irony: even in trying to reject modernity and globalization, Bhutto's characters can't escape the performative, simulacra-driven nature of their world. Their radical choices aim to find a stable identity in a society that offers none.

Discussion and Analysis

In *The Runaways*, Bhutto touches on many issues such as identity, religion, and nationalism, and narrates her story using the method known as polyphony because postmodernism does not aim to offer the main opinion but a mixture of various voices. Through having multiple, complex characters, the author also sustains the fragmented and pluralistic facets of the identity of her characters, thus defining multiple meanings, and rejecting reductive outputs. This polyphonic approach accords with Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of "dialogism" (Bakhtin, 1984), in which voices in a text inter-animate without merging. Thus, presenting multiple approaches to radicalization and belonging, Bhutto explores postmodern theory's most important postulate – that identity is fundamentally unstable. Postmodernism discredits the existence of universal absolutes and states that every realization of the outside world is relative. According to Jean-François Lyotard, what can be referred to as 'the politics of postmodern hyperspace,' we are witnessing the age of incredulity toward meta narratives (Lyotard, 1984, p.xxiv), that is, towards totalizing discourses associated with religion, nationalism, and identity. In *The Runaways*, Bhutto's characters— Monty, Sunny, and Anita—radically transform their identity and possess reactions that lack stable references to the socio-political context. For example, Monty – a suburban boy from Karachi – coming to the war-torn city of Mosul is a refusal to affirm the markers of class-based identity.

Monty's story is also quite post-modern in the manner in which it demonstrates a condition that has become known as the postmodern identity crisis. "Identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions" (Hall, 1996, p. 4). This is especially true when Monty switches between the different sides, which, in Hall's opinion, never fully owns any of them. Bhutto writes, "The boundaries of his world had always been artificial, drawn in invisible ink that could be erased and rewritten" (Bhutto, 2018, p. 112). Monty experiences the confusion of self-identity when torn between two cultures. Bhutto mentions that "Monty felt as if he was drifting, his identity slipping through his fingers" (Bhutto, 2018, p. 123). It is possible to suppose that his further radicalization is a reaction to the desire for a stable and clearly outlined position even if this position is criminal. He tries to reclaim meaning in his life by joining the Ummah Movement, thus this effort is also a confession of his failure to synthesize a divided self. Likewise, the processes that brought Sunny to radicalization can be described from the point of view of "hyperreality" by Jean Baudrillard (Baudrillard, 1994). According to Baudrillard the framing of hyperreal refers to a situation where individuals cannot distinguish between real and fantasy in their environment. Bhutto captures this concept perfectly through Sunny's online



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radicalization: "The screen became a portal, reality dissolving into pixels of manufactured heroism" (Bhutto, 2018, p. 198). Sunny's life in Portsmouth is unhappy and he is muted between two worlds; Pakistani and British. When he attempts to flee this fragmented self he starts desiring the hyperreal image of a jihadist martyr propagated in Jihadist media. Bhutto comments: "Sunny saw himself in the footage, a warrior without a nation, a hero in his own story (Bhutto, 2028, p. 201). This ideal is created by radical ideologies of the society and it becomes closer to reality for him than any reality he faces. Although Sunny's decision to go to Mosul is not a claim to a jihadist reason rooted in personal experience, rather his position is forged through a simulated relation produced by extreme narratives. The female protagonist in the novel, Anita, also adds a layer to the polyphonic structure which comprises gender, religion, and class construction of identity. As Judith Butler said, identity is performative where the acts are imposed by the society in which a person exists (Butler, 1990). Anita being a Christian woman who hails from Karachi, Pakistan is the epitome of a person with no influence, power, and status in the greater Pakistani society; she continues to play different roles assigned to her by whoever is in her periphery. For example, Bhutto describes Anita's contemplation while leaving Karachi "Leaving felt like breaking free and becoming whole, yet she feared that leaving also meant becoming invisible" (Bhutto, 2018, p. 212). A similar idea is found in Butler: identity is built within communities and regulated by constant enforcement of norms, because of this, Anita's struggle for/against visibility is deeply touched upon here. Her character defies cultural expectations of identity by rejecting the idea of getting recognized only based on religion or social class. The dislocation of the identities of Bhutto's characters also reflects a postmodern analysis of nationalism. While Benedict Anderson conceives the idea of the nation as an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983), it is certainly a real one, based on historical experiences, narratives, and symbols. However, these discerning modalities of self-creation are not adequately contained by the imaginary of globalization prevalent in the formative cultures to which Monty, Sunny, and Anita belong. By all accounts, the notion of Pakistan as a unified national subject does not make any sense for Monty, a young man from the West who is caught between Karachi's high life and a jihadist fantasy. According to Anderson, nationalism is very weak and Bhutto portraying Monty's lack of acceptance by society can be seen to support this view.

When Monty joins the Ummah Movement he desires to grow a sense of place and acceptance with an entirely different, global community. Bhutto captures this essence while describing his inner conflict, "Nationality was a costume he could never quite fit, always slightly ill-fitting, always revealing more than it concealed" (Bhutto, 2018, p. 94). However, the failure of this allegiance simply features in the postmodernists' critique of ideological formations. The theme of religious identity in *The Runaways* also focuses on the postmodern rejection of solid ground in terms of bitter truths. In the same way, as Bhutto describes, the idea of Islam practiced by her characters is selective unidimensional knowledge based on the selective vision filtered through the lenses of deconstructionist Jacques Derrida. For Derrida language and concepts are constructed in such a way that there are always binary opposites and meaning is always suspended (Derrida, 1967). Sunny, who initially fully supports the jihadist idea, starts doubting its



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rightfulness after realizing the cruelty of the Ummah Movement. He comprehends that his knowledge has been binary, which causes his spiritual doubt that forms the base of his postmodern attitude in the direction of religion: it is a multiplying construction. She admitted this when she writes “Sunny could not reconcile the Islam of his father's teaching with the one he saw in the desert, an Islam of violence and vengeance” (Bhutto, 2018, p.387). This splitting of religious subjects within deconstructive frameworks proves what Derrida often said about the systems of belief being irretrievably paradoxical, like language. Besides, *The Runaways* also protested against discrimination based on nationalist and religious beliefs on outcasts. Thus, despite the Polyphonic approach, Bhutto points out the gaps in nationalist and religious discourses, revealed in the transformation of Anita into a voiceless object. Anita being a Christian in a predominantly Muslim country is a portrayal of the true idea of the unhomely as suggested by Homi Bhabha, being references to cultural or societal outsiders. In the view of Bhabha, “the unhomely” is the state that is characterized by people’s inability to belong to a mainstream culture or a marginal culture (Bhabha, 1994). The portrayal of Anita’s position which Bhutto mentioned is extremely depressing as she states, “like a closing door, the whole world outside and her trapped within” (Bhutto, 2018, p. 250). This aptly captures a life of feeling both useless and unseen in a world that expects assimilation while simultaneously robbing them of a right to exist. Therefore, the plurality of voices that *The Runaways* use questions the fixed binaries of West and East, self-identity and other, believer and non-believer. Therefore, unlike the demand of many conventional Building narratives for closure to the character’s psychological development, the search is left continuous and unresolved; this mirrors the globalized world in which the characters of Bhutto wander from place to place in search of their identities – a futile endeavor given the fluidity of borders and identities in the globalization age. This lack of an answer comports with postmodernism’s insistence upon the lack of essence and recognizes Subjectivity as pluralistic, relativistic, and Heterogeneous. Bhutto is characteristic of global postmodernism, where identity, religion, and nationalism are not fixed entities, but a voice of a polyphonic discursive chorus.

This paper examined Bhutto’s *The Runaways* from a postmodern perspective with special observations on how identity, religion, and nationalism have been represented as fractured, multiple, and conflicted in an increasingly emerged and globalized world that came into being post 9/11. With references to Bakhtin, Lyotard, Foucault, Derrida, Baudrillard, Žižek, and others, the analysis illustrated how Bhutto’s characters of Monty, Sunny and Anita deal with their fragmented world and postmodern personas. The only important finding is that Bhutto has been able to depict the model of polyphony, which has no hegemonic truth, thus symbolizing the other important themes of postmodernism – namely instability and multiplicity. In each of their cases, the issues depicted oppose clear divisions, thereby denying nationalism, and religious and personal grand stories. Instead, they have amorphous selves that reject teleological resolutions as they offer a worldliness that defies unity and clarity in a globalized world. Bhutto’s greatest achievement in this study lies in the ways her characters challenge ideological paradigms. The attempt to balance opposing cultural signs results in Monty’s change, reflecting the postmodern subject: when the image founders fail to live



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up to the goal of creating a hybrid subject position, they become terrorists. Sunny became exacerbated due to Baudrillard's hyperreality as his fantasies and ideologies instead of personal experiences guide his actions. Such a trajectory forms a clear reference to Butler's performative gender identity, as Anita struggles with religion, class, and gender rule in Pakistan.

Conclusion

Bhutto's narrative style as a postmodernist construct challenges sanguine notions of identity and nationality and explains how globalized, mediated existence produces feelings of immiscibility and displacement, which undermine such cultural, religious, and national paradigms. The study proves that the application of postmodern theoretics helps decode the plurality and hybridity of voice and subject positions in the neoliberal world. *The Runaways* shows how a postmodern approach that does not accept clear binary oppositions, and the tendency towards multiplicity may unveil ideological conflicts and open the area for politicization of such nations. Further research in this regard can extend this scrutiny to look into how Bhutto's narrative techniques may be understood when discussed in conjunction with ecofeminism or postcolonialism as they relate to postmodernism. Also, cross-sectional comparisons of the author and other writers from other South Asian authors who have also tackled issues of identity, religion, and nationalism may provide a broader understanding of the South Asian literary system. It is also possible that an opportunity to pursue the analysis of mediated realities and globalized cultures and their impact on individual identity and ideological constructions within the framework of sociological and political science research supplemented with elements of media studies was missed. Finally, this study confirms that in the postmodern state, identity is not just an ever-debated but a constant and open contestation that cannot be bracketed off as a single category. These recurring propositions announce Bhutto's *The Runaways* not only as a novel but indeed as a multi-faceted and multi-layered reflection, a phenomenological exploration, of existence in the twenty-first century.

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