

BREAKING CHAINS: WOMEN'S IDENTITY CRISIS IN FATIMA BHUTTO AND MEENA KANDASAMY'S NARRATIVES.

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Abstract

This paper explores how women's identity crisis are complexly portrayed in the writings of two well-known authors, Meena Kandasamy and Fatima Bhutto. It examines the complex difficulties faced by female characters in negotiating societal expectations, cultural constraints, and the quest for selfhood through a close analysis of Fatima Bhutto's *The Runaways* and Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*. It aims to analyse how the protagonists confront societal expectations, personal aspirations, and the complexities of relationships, ultimately navigating their identities within the context of cultural norms and traditions. By examining character development, narrative techniques, and thematic elements, this study provides insights into the complexities of identity formation and crisis in contemporary fiction. The paper aims to highlight the unique perspectives each author brings to the theme of identity struggle while also uncovering common threads and divergences between the two novels.

Keywords: Women, Identity, Struggle, Narratives, Culture, Society

Identity crisis is a common and powerful theme in literature that allows authors to delve into the complexities of human existence. This narrative element often involves characters who are struggling with issues of self-discovery, personal authenticity, and the challenges posed by societal expectations. Literature's exploration of identity crises provides readers with a reflection of their journeys of self-discovery. Through diverse characters and narratives, authors contribute to a deeper understanding of the human experience, inviting readers to empathise with and contemplate the universal struggles of identity.

In contemporary literature, authors often explore the complexities of human experience through the struggles of identity. This paper compares the narratives of Fatima Bhutto's *The Runaways* and Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*. Both novels provide a profound insight into the multifaceted nature of identity, and the challenges individuals face with societal expectations, personal aspirations, and the interplay of tradition and modernity. Within the world of modern literature, which echoes the complexities of the human experience, two prolific writers,

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Fatima Bhutto and Meena Kandasamy, stand out for their moving examinations of identity problems. Fatima Bhutto and Meena Kandasamy, who both come from varied backgrounds and contribute distinctive viewpoints to the literary world, give readers stories that explore the intricacies of a person's identity in the face of conventions, expectations from society, and goals from within.

Fatima Bhutto is a writer, poet, and journalist from Pakistan. She was raised in Pakistan and Syria after being born in Kabul, Afghanistan, and her multicultural background had a big impact on her writing. Her literary creations, which encompass poems, essays, and novels, exhibit an acute awareness of the political and cultural contexts that influence the identities of her women characters. Fatima Bhutto's *The Runaways* presents a captivating framework for examining identity as its characters set off on self-discovery excursions against the backdrop of a world that is changing quickly. She explores themes of displacement, family expectations, and the clash between tradition and modernity through her sophisticated storytelling. In the review, Praveena Shivram observes that, "The Runaways is awash with such detail that you physically breathe in the world. Here, thoughts singe and burn, personalities crackle and simmer, and choice, that all pervasive thing, is like circumstance's dangling noose, at once dangerous and inevitable" (n.p.).

In her novel *The Runaways*, Bhutto tells the story of three young characters: Anita Rose, Sunny, and Monty. Through these characters, she explores the theme of identity. The first protagonist of the story is a young Christian girl named Anita Rose. She lives in the Machar colony of Karachi and is very poor. She dreams of escaping her poverty and living a luxurious life. Anita Rose is unhappy with her life due to her family's poor background. She goes to Osama Shah's home to borrow things, feeling ashamed and guilty of her poverty. Her classmates tease and ignore her at school because she comes from a lower-class family. She dreams of having a luxurious life and looking like the women she sees in TV dramas, but in reality, she lives an oppressed and miserable life. Fatima Bhutto portrays the life of Anita and society's hypocrisy as "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). Her family struggles to make ends meet, and she becomes the victim of identity crises due to societal values, social stratification, and the class system.

Fatima Bhutto portrays Anita's hardships and the hypocrisy of society, where there are no moral values but wealth values. In the book, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and women's development*, Gilligan's theory of psychosocial identity crisis highlights the importance of female identity development, which Anita tries to achieve despite her circumstances. Anita struggles with an inferiority complex due to her social status. She has many dreams, but they never seem to come true in her real life. She has never had a real boyfriend and always faces this crisis. In Bhutto's words, "My name is Anita Rose, she wished Rahim could have known, Anita like an actress, Rose Like a flower." (36). This highlights the emptiness of her life and her constant identity issues. Anita desires a better life where people know her by her name, but in this materialistic world, people judge her based

on her class and status. She wishes for Rahim to talk to her and call her 'baby', but her current status is not strong enough to have a relationship with him. Anita has forgotten her true identity and wants to adopt the identity of an actress because she believes that society only accepts people who are financially strong and look good.

In the end, Anita appears as Layla; that is, Anita has renamed herself. She is transported to Dubai. She is forced into prostitution, where her job is to quench the lust of irritated upper-class men. Elite Arabs use her as a sex toy, filming her in intimate moments and sharing them on social media. She makes it through her life as a prostitute. She set out on her voyage nevertheless, in quest of comfort and tranquilly, but her confused mental condition led her down an unidentified path; she lied, concealed her true identity, and chose a course that was not appropriate for her. It blatantly displays her confused self. She has assumed the persona of Layla in an attempt to live a life of luxury and high status. But in exchange, she has received nothing but sexual abuse and a life of shame. Anita is unaware of Syria, but she is finding it extremely difficult to lead a normal life these days. The causes of this were Shah's religious teachings and her family's actions, particularly her brother's worries. It takes Anita to Syria in order to fight. In the research paper, "Exploring Identity Crisis in Fatima Bhutto's *The Runaways: A Psychosocial Perspective*", Ghulam Haider Shaikh observes that, "Anita Rose becomes the victim of identity crisis because of her poor background of the family. It is her mind-set that people with big bank balance are the real men and they are accepted in the society" (16).

Meena Kandasamy is a writer, poet, feminist, translator, and activist known for her bravery and rebellious spirit. Her poetry collections often focus on themes of caste oppression, women's empowerment, and the psychological pressures faced by women. The novel *When I Hit You* is about an unnamed narrator who is a young wife. She falls in love with a college lecturer and marries him. After the wedding, she finds herself in a marital world where her identity and space are in crisis. The narrator and her husband move from Chennai to Mangalore, where she is not allowed to speak her mother tongue. She is confined to a small space consisting of three rooms and a veranda, with limited access. She has no friends or family networks there. To make matters worse, she must learn Kannada, a language she is not comfortable with. The narrator says that "In this language I am nothing except a housewife" (93).

Following their marriage, the narrator and her husband play a game of chess in which she assumes the position of a king and is constantly threatened by her husband, who assumes the part of the drama queen. In the research paper "Gender Inequality, Self Identity Crisis and Marital Violence in Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*", Abul Kalam S K, observes that "the unnamed narrator has to do the ways her husband wants her to do or to make; like what to wear, what to talk, or how to walk etc. In this process her self-entirety is lost "like a house after robbery" and made herself 'Other'" (4587). She must act in the manner that her partner directs her to act, such as telling her what to wear, say, or walk. Her sense of self is lost during this process. In the present era, it is a person's fundamental right to use social media, to promote their work and art through it, to

obtain news to stay informed, or to become a positive netizen. However, the narrator constantly feels under control of her husband, and she feels completely alone in her new home. Here, Facebook or mass media is her only means of communication with the outside world. Her husband uses self-burning blackmail to force her to deactivate her Facebook account, citing reasons such as

It's narcissism. It's exhibitionism. It's a waste of time. I've said this to you a thousand times. It's merely you voluntarily feeding information straight to the CIA, to the RAW, to the IB, to everyone who is hounding my life. Every fucking thing is being monitored. Your life may be a peepshow, but I'm a revolutionary. I cannot let you endanger me. (p.50)

Her husband wants to maintain his dominance over her and keep her in his surveillance. He then uses her email password to reply to her messages without getting her permission. The narrator states that, "I feel nauseous .I feel robbed of my identity. I'm no longer myself if another person can so easily claim to be me, pretend to be me , and assume any life while we live under the same roof."(p.55)

The research paper sheds light on the profound journeys of female protagonists as they grapple with multifaceted challenges in their quest to redefine their identities within the works of Fatima Bhutto and Meena Kandasamy. It delves into the complexities of societal expectations, cultural norms, and personal aspirations that shape the female characters' struggles for autonomy and self-discovery. Through the lens of Fatima Bhutto's *The Runaways* and Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You*, readers witness the protagonists breaking free from the chains of patriarchal structures, societal constraints, and oppressive relationships. The narratives serve as powerful tools for challenging established norms and fostering a deeper understanding of the diverse dimensions of womanhood. Both authors employ nuanced storytelling techniques, providing readers with insight into the resilience and agency of women confronting adversity. Their works not only contribute to feminist literary discourse but also offer a global perspective on the universal challenges faced by women in their quest for self-actualization. Fatima Bhutto and Meena Kandasamy's narratives transcend cultural boundaries, inviting readers to reflect on the complexities of women's experiences while acknowledging the intersections of gender, culture, and societal expectations.

As readers navigate the rich tapestry of these narratives, they recognise that the breaking of chains is not merely a metaphorical act within the novels; it is a call to action, an assertion of agency, and a testament to the enduring strength of women in the face of adversity. The paper underscores the significance of literature in portraying and challenging societal norms, offering readers a deeper understanding of the transformative power embedded in women's identity struggles. It contributes to the on-going discourse on women's identity, offering a poignant exploration of the triumphs and tribulations that accompany the pursuit of selfhood and beckoning readers to continue engaging with and questioning the narratives that shape our understanding of women's lives.

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