

INTERSECTIONALITY IN POST-COLONIAL SPACES: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF FATIMA BHUTTO'S *THE RUNAWAYS*

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Abstract

Women's portrayal in fiction has been a vital concern for scholars, authors, and critics for decades in almost every world society. This qualitative study aims to uncover how the female characters in The Runaways are silenced, marginalised, or othered, and reflect colonial and patriarchal legacies in these experiences. Plus, women's roles are portrayed in the novel in resisting their subjugation and navigating their path to post-colonial feminist liberation. Spivak's (1988) and Beauvoir's (1956) theories of post-colonial feminism provide the underpinning for this study. The previous studies, Iftikhar et al. (2022), focused on the defence mechanism, Rabbi et al. (2023) focused on the alienation from a psychoanalytical lens, Sarwar et al. (2023) focused on Freudian psychoanalysis, and Sani et al. (2024) analysed The Runaways, investigating its application of Stuart Hall's theory of representation. The research gap is to analyse the novel's thorough post-colonial feminism. Integrating women's oppression, marginalisation, and otherness emergencies through female protagonists' firsthand experiences improves the critical understanding of the novel. Female characters as agents of resistance can help challenge universal objectification. The study concludes that the characters of Anita (Layla) Rose, Naya, and Zenobia are silenced by internalised shame, emotional suppression, and social surveillance structures rooted in colonial dominance and patriarchal discipline, according to the study. It also concludes that despite being constrained by oppressive systems, the women characters resist through subtle acts of defiance, emotional endurance, and reclaiming their bodily autonomy.

Introduction

Women's portrayal in fiction has been a vital concern for scholars, authors, and critics for decades in almost every world society. Literary work produced in any corner of the world cannot be seen as natural, impartial, and neutral, but also as dominated by socio-political conditions. Literature reflects the societal condition and ongoing situation in society. Gender inequality is a social issue affecting the lives of numerous women and girls in every corner of the world. Gender inequality is discrimination, bias, and prejudice towards someone due to their sex.

Women's issues are widely discussed in almost every genre of literature. Bapsi Sidhwa, Kamila Shamsie, Shaila Abdullah, Tehmina Durrani, Bina Shah, Kishwar Naheed, Saba Karim Khan, and Fatima Bhutto are famous Pakistani female writers writing about women's issues in Pakistan and all over the world. These writers are writing about the plight of women in a patriarchal society and throwing light on the struggle and courage of Pakistani women who are trying hard for their equal rights in society. They are writing for the sake of the collective wisdom of the community and breaking the shackles of slavery and violence for women present in society.

The researcher argues that women's portrayal in Pakistani fiction literature is confined, and they are not assigned sufficient robust, bold, and essential roles compared to men. They are portrayed as physically, socially, and financially dependent on the men of their families. Gender identities created by fiction novels are not real and endorse patriarchal beliefs in Pakistani society. Bhargava (2009) remarks that gender stereotypes are a psychological process

which illustrates structured sets of beliefs about the personal attributes of men and women. Consequently, it is possible to claim a connection between the stereotyped representation of women in literature and patriarchal ideas in a culture. The present study unmasks the link through the selected novel's textual analysis and assigns social roles to women. In a society facing severe feminist issues and continuing gender inequality, the novel *The Runaways* by Fatima Bhutto (2019) explores the complex relationships between women's vocal oppression, identity crises, and belongings. The novel's evocative words and painstaking details transport readers to a universe where women's fate is interwoven.

Spivak (1988) researched marginalised individuals and those who face limitations in their ability to articulate themselves and exercise influence within prevailing discourses. Her work provides a critical analysis of the tendency of Western discourses to marginalise and suppress viewpoints originating from marginalised populations, explicitly emphasising the experiences of women residing in the Global South. Spivak's (1988) theoretical framework places significant importance on the complex interrelationship between power streams, processes of representation, and actions of resistance.

One of the focal points of *The Runaways* by Fatima Bhutto (2019) is the subjugation of women and exploitation of marginalised communities. This research aims to analyse how the novel depicts the outcomes and its influence on women leading characters from a post-colonial feminist perspective. The researchers aim to explore the complex interrelationships among women's oppression, their resistance, and the post-colonial feminist issues portrayed in the novel through an in-depth analysis of the narrative. *The Runaways* also reveals how patriarchal societies deny women their proper status. Bhutto has exposed the oppression, marginalization, and exploitation of women in Pakistan's patriarchal society. Here, women's emancipation is highlighted and gender stereotypes are contested. The social construction of women as the 'other' is examined.

This study deepens the comprehension of the dense obstacles confronting women concerning their cultural suffocation in post-colonial societies. This study aims to emphasise the empowering roles that female characters play in resisting objectification. This underscores the significance of post-colonial feminist empowerment and social justice principles in addressing these pressing issues. Providing insightful perspectives contributes to advancing literary analysis and the broader academic discourse about gender, class, and social justice.

The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. In what ways are the female characters in *The Runaways* silenced, marginalised, or othered, and how do these experiences reflect colonial and patriarchal legacies?
2. What role do women characters play in resisting their subjugation and navigating their path to post-colonial feminist liberation?

Review of the Literature

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) is a renowned scholar and intellectual known for her contributions to post-colonial theory. The theory of the subaltern, as proposed by Spivak (1988), holds substantial importance within the sphere of post-colonial studies and critical theory. Ashraf et al. (2020, p. 1001) claim that the Italian Marxist initially used the term subaltern and the political activist Antonio Gramsci in his book *Prison Notebooks* (1929-1935). The term 'subaltern' first denoted individuals or collectives who experience social, political, and economic marginalisation, typically occupying disadvantaged societal positions. Nevertheless, Spivak's (1988) definition has broadened the scope of the term to include individuals who are not only marginalised but cannot express themselves and exert influence in dominant discourses.

Spivak's (1988) examines how prevailing Western discourse often portrays and suppresses the perspectives of marginalised communities, specifically focusing on women

hailing from the Global South. Spivak (1988) critically examines the concept of representation and raises inquiries regarding the ability of the subaltern to effectively articulate their perspectives within the confines of dominant discourse, given their limited access to platforms of expression. Spivak's (1988) contributions illuminate how colonial powers have suppressed indigenous knowledge systems, languages, and cultural practices, reinforcing the subaltern's lack of capacity to exercise their agency. Ashraf et al. (2020) remark that "The word 'subaltern' is significant in Pakistani English fiction as the prevailing patriarchal society also contributes to the marginalisation of the women" (p. 1002).

The Second Sex is a seminal work in feminist literature that presents a groundbreaking analysis of the historical course of women, providing a transformative viewpoint on their societal position. De Beauvoir's rigorous investigation reveals the underlying body of male hegemony, categorising women as the 'Other'. The core focus of her theories centres on the fundamental distinction between genders. De Beauvoir's argument regarding objectifying women as the 'Other' aligns with this study's central subject of verbal subjugation. Similarly, Beauvoir (1956, p. 77) claims that "a man is defined as a human being in this world, whereas a woman is a female, a gendered being". She (1956) further asserted, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (p. 295).

Sultan et al. (2021) present an ecofeminist perspective on Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam*. The study investigates the novel's portrayal of women, Others, and nature, examining their treatment as objects utilised and traded for profit. This research is supported by ecofeminist ideology, which highlights the interrelatedness of the vocal subjugation of women, the control of the environment, and the exploitation of marginalised communities. This study utilises textual analysis to investigate the impact of androcentric and anthropocentric ideologies on the instrumentalization and commodification of identities. The research emphasises the insufficient recognition of these identities' intrinsic value and ethical considerations. The conclusion indicates that patriarchal institutions sustain the objectification and commercialisation of women, marginalised groups, and the environment in various cultural settings.

Plumwood's (1993) analysis of value dualism provides insight into the underlying structures of dualistic thought and the exploitation of disadvantaged communities. The features above, namely backgrounding (denial), radical exclusion (hyper-separation), incorporation (relational definition), instrumentalism (objectification), and homogenisation or stereotyping, are identified. The characteristics above play a role in marginalising particular identities as tools for the advantage of more powerful groups. Both studies highlight the devaluation of marginalised identities while prioritising dominant identities as a goal, thus demonstrating the widespread prevalence of instrumentalization.

Iftikhar et al. (2022) analysed the three principal characters, Anita (Layla), Sunny, and Monty, in Fatima Bhutto's novel *The Runaways* through the lens of defence mechanisms theory. Data reflects Cramer's theory of defence mechanisms. In her definition of defence mechanisms, Phebe Cramer posits that denial is the most significant component of these mechanisms. The analysis is based on the experiences of the protagonists, who, due to their realistic and ethical concerns, undergo personality transformations and confront dire circumstances, including poverty, migration, disaffection, violence, alienation, exploitation, and dislocation.

Rabbi et al. (2023) examine the alienation experienced by Young Adults in the contemporary post-9/11 context, which contributes to their engagement in terrorist activities. The analysis is framed by referencing Fatima Bhutto's novel *The Runaways* (2019). Fundamentalism and radicalism are frequently linked to terrorism of a religious nature. This research aims to investigate the potential causes of gun violence among youth. The theme of

alienation is further examined through a psychoanalytical lens, utilising Lacan's notion of the Other. An in-depth analysis of the novel will elucidate the psychological state of youth ensnared in extremism and radicalism.

Sarwar et al. (2023) examined how an individual's psychological experiences, influenced by diverse social, sociological, and financial factors, act as a catalyst for addressing fundamental issues, particularly concerning the radicalisation of the younger generation. The manifest content of Fatima Bhutto's *The Runaways* indicates that poverty, identity crisis, and alienation are causes of radicalisation; however, this research emphasises that, in addition to these sociological factors, specific personal psychological elements are also involved. These psychological factors encompass fundamental issues such as fear of abandonment, diminished self-esteem, an unstable self-concept, and existential anxiety. The fundamental issues explain why the male protagonists of the novel, despite originating from diverse geographical regions and possessing varied life experiences, ultimately converged in the same extremist organisation. This research is informed by Freudian Psychoanalytic theory. The employed methodology entails a closed reading of the text through the lens of Freudian Psychoanalytic Theory. The research concludes that both male protagonists exhibit neuroticism, characterised by an unconscious preoccupation with their fears and fundamental issues.

Sani et al. (2024) analysed *The Runaways*, investigating its application of Stuart Hall's theory of representation to depict the identities and experiences of its protagonists within a post-colonial context. The analysis examines the depiction of resistance to colonial and post-colonial narratives and power structures, highlighting the characters' struggle against imposed identities and societal conventions.

The previous studies, Iftikhar et al. (2022), focus on the defence mechanism, Rabbi et al. (2023) focus on the alienation from a psychoanalytical lens, Sarwar et al. (2023) focused on Freudian psychoanalysis, and Sani et al. (2024) analysed *The Runaways*, investigating its application of Stuart Hall's theory of representation. The research gap is to analyse the novel's thorough post-colonial feminism. Integrating women's oppression, marginalisation, and otherness emergencies through female protagonists' firsthand experiences improves the critical understanding of the novel. Female characters as agents of resistance can help challenge universal objectification.

Research Design and Methodology

The research adopts a qualitative methodology that prioritises the importance of subjective interpretation. This methodology enables a detailed and in-depth examination of the literary work, promoting a thorough understanding of its underlying themes. The research method employed in the present study is textual analysis of Bhutto's novel *The Runaways* (2019). It has been chosen for a thorough examination to scrutinise and evaluate the complex themes that relate to the suppression of women's voices, subjugation, negation of autonomy in post-colonial spaces and their resistance to equal rights and liberation from patriarchy. Furthermore, other themes such as gender issues, women's objectification, and empowerment are also considered. The analysis involves a careful close reading of the text. Close reading entails a methodical and thorough analysis of the novel's storyline, characters, and literary elements.

Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in the theoretical framework of the profound feminist perspectives of Simone de Beauvoir's seminal work *The Second Sex* (1949). This work critically examines the pervasive myth of the 'eternal feminine' and presents a compelling argument for the urgent need to dismantle gender-based inequality. De Beauvoir's critique encompasses the societal construction of women's roles, focusing on the contrast between 'femininity' and 'masculinity'. The author challenges the idea that these roles are inherent and

provides evidence to support the claim that they are constructs of society. De Beauvoir's examination of the 'situations' experienced by women reveals the inherent connection between gender and societal norms and pressures. Women often find themselves in various positions, such as mothers, wives, or entertainers, that are intended to perpetuate their subordinate status.

A thorough investigation is needed to expose the essential principles of male supremacy that label women as the 'Other' (De Beauvoir, 1956). Her theories revolve around how genders are fundamentally different, which is also the main idea of her study on linguistic subordination. According to her, men are frequently thought of as people who represent the very best of humanity in the structure of society. Women, on the other hand, are frequently reduced to their biological sex and seen as gendered objects as a result (Beauvoir, 1956). This argument is completely in line with the investigation of gender-based oppression. De Beauvoir (1956) dismantles biological determinism, the idea that biology defines gender roles, asserting that societal norms and institutions create and perpetuate femininity. A woman's subordination, then, is not "natural" but culturally imposed. Their experiences of womanhood are not universal, but intersectional constructed through race, class, geography, and politics.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is well known for her significant contributions to post-colonial theory (Spivak, 1988). Spivak (1988) covers marginalized people and those who struggle to express themselves, exercise influence within dominant discourses, and label them subaltern. She specifically emphasizes the experiences of women who live in the Global South in her research, which offers a critical examination of the tendency of Western discourses to marginalize and suppress opinions from marginalized people. The complex interactions between power interplays, representational processes, and acts of resistance are given much weight in Spivak's (1988) theoretical framework.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The novel has three main leading characters: Sunny is from a southern town in England, Monty hails from an affluent family in Karachi, and Anita (Layla) (Layla) originates from the impoverished areas of Karachi. The text thoroughly examines their challenges, including familial background, social status, geographic location, historical context, parental influence, sexuality, and identity. The characters are crafted with realism. Anita (Layla) Rose is the daughter of a *Malash Wali*, paid to massage wealthy women's aching bones. Moreover, endures the severe limitations of poverty that constrain her existence in numerous unforeseen ways. In the impoverished areas of Karachi, she attends a local school where she experiences bullying and mistreatment, resulting in a lack of genuine companionship with peers her age.

Bhutto illustrates that each protagonist experiences a crisis: Anita (Layla) perceives herself as deserving more than her confining existence in a small house with her mother and unscrupulous brother. Each of Bhutto's characters is complex and fully realised. Having endured severe poverty, Anita (Layla) discovers hope and a potential escape from her circumstances through her friendship with her elderly neighbor. Anita (Layla)'s life irrevocably transformed upon encountering her elderly neighbor, a man whose extensive collection of books offers an escape to an alternate reality. When she is sent to an elderly neighbor, it transforms into her venue for alternative education. He assumes the role of her mentor and educator, introducing her to poets like Mir Taqi Mir and Faiz Ahmed Faiz and politically and anticapitalist texts. Unbeknownst to him, the literature and poetry he requests that Anita (Layla) Rose recite serve as catalysts for her radicalization.

Bhutto (2019) incorporates subversive elements of the South Asian diaspora by employing local phrases to communicate a message. Through allusions to Pakistan's revolutionary poets such as Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Habib Jalib, Bhutto empowers Anita (Layla) in her struggle against an oppressive regime. Bhutto (2019) presented an incisive exploration of post-colonial feminist issues, particularly about language, identity, cultural dislocation, and

the convergence of gendered experiences with colonial heritage. Layla's leading character rejected the colonial cultural authority by stating, "She didn't consider European books classics, because they spoke to no part of her experience" (Bhutto, 2019, p. 106). From the point of post-colonial feminism, Western literature has misrepresented or not appropriately portrayed Eastern women's experiences, recognition and issues. Layla's claim resonates with Spivak's (1988) subaltern idea that she cannot speak, feel and locate herself within the Western dominant text.

Urdu, which Layla asserts as her own, "She read in Urdu because it was the language she suffered in, a language that encompassed all her sorrows" (p. 106), surpasses mere communication; it serves as the linguistic manifestation of her anguish, encapsulating female suffering under patriarchy and post-colonial trauma. When Layla asks Monty, "Don't you feel strange, speaking a language every day that's not your own?" (p. 106), she expresses a fundamental post-colonial concern: the alienation of having to navigate and express oneself within a linguistic structure that the coloniser historically employed. Monty and Layla exemplify gendered reactions to colonial heritage. As a male, Monty appreciates linguistic proficiency and authenticity in English, the language of authority and prestige. As a woman, Layla selects Urdu not merely to safeguard her cultural identity but also to affirm her epistemic autonomy—to feel, articulate, and exist according to her terms.

Bhutto explores themes of betrayal, violence, discrimination, marginalisation, and subjugation of women through female characters, as well as the repercussions of choices made, love, determination, and the quest for true identity or rightful place. In *The Runaways*, Bhutto (2019) asserts that women in our society are not as autonomously subjugated as men, yet they are regarded as the inferior sex. Bhutto depicted the existence of Pakistani women who sacrificed their authentic identities to create an improved world for themselves. *The Runaways* depicts the challenges and sacrifices of virtuous mothers. Zenobia, Anita (Layla)'s mother, diligently manages her significant responsibilities in raising her children, especially her daughter. She is indifferent to her health. She dedicates her entire life to her children. As a mother, she disregards her existence. When Anita (Layla) thinks of her mother, "She could still smell her, a warm scent of sweat and sweet oils — clove, apricot, mustard, almond" (p. 34).

Consequently, Zenobia dedicates herself entirely to her children. In a patriarchal society, poor people are marginalised. Bhutto delineates a mother's effort for her children. The patriarchal system is accountable for their deplorable condition. They have been exploited, violently murdered under the guise of honour, sexually assaulted, threatened, oppressed, and intentionally subjected to unimaginable violence. Women have forfeited their authentic selves and individuality in contemporary Pakistani society, which is predominantly governed. Women encounter isolation, alienation, helplessness, and emotional and psychological stress and trauma as a result of these inequalities.

Bhutto presents a profoundly feminist and post-colonial depiction of a female character whose body serves as an archive of social injustice. Zenobia's face and her quiet request for cooking gas exemplify gendered poverty, unrecognised emotional labour, and the psychological burdens shouldered by women in post-colonial domestic environments. The text "The small pouches under her eyes seemed heavier and her already-swollen lips bulged slightly, the way a face looks when it cries and cries and cries. 'We need some gas to cook with (p. 9-10)'" emphasises race, embodiment, and visibility. Unlike the colonial or Western gaze that either eroticises or erases brown women, this description confronts the reader with a non-idealised reality of ageing, fatigue, and persistent suffering.

The text further emphasises how post-colonial patriarchy instils in women a fear of their desires. Anita (Layla)'s hesitance "She didn't like asking for water, no matter how dry her throat; she didn't want to beg the use of his cooker or ask to borrow oil or sugar — she

especially hated asking for that” (p. 10-11) illustrates the emotional burden of femininity in a society that associates womanhood with sacrifice, silence, and invisibility. Anita (Layla)’s mother’s character shows how women are sexually abused in patriarchal societies. She knew “that he was fond of her daughter, (p. 10-11), but still sent her to the neighbours’ Osama’s house to ask for material favours. Anita (Layla)’s refusal to plead renders her a symbol of subtle defiance. This declaration encapsulates the essence of independence and fortitude derived from recognising one’s identity. It is a potent affirmation of self-esteem, indicating a rejection of conventional gender roles.

Women suffer existential displacement, showing that emotional alienation is not confined to East or West but is shaped by intersecting oppressions. Anita endures significant hardship in her pursuit of a better life within a patriarchal society. She is subjugated by society and has lost her identity. She forfeits her authentic name, which signifies her true identity. She calls herself Layla- a new name, new identity. ‘ ‘ Call me Layla. It’s who I am now” (p.263).

Living in deprivation and misfortune, Anita (Layla) was introduced to radical poets such as Habib Jalib and Faiz Ahmed Faiz by her neighbour Osama. This ignited Anita (Layla)’s desire for the lifestyle her classmates enjoyed. Layla examines Marxist Pakistani poetry and critiques the hypocrisy of her educators. Anita (Layla) Rose is driven to pursue an alternative life by the humiliation of servitude and the limitations of poverty: “I am a lioness and I will never be a man’s woman” (p. 92). Her commitment to herself is “I am a lioness, she had even written on the first page, over her earlier, less confident scrawls” (p. 112-13). Bhutto recognises that radical Islamism is alluring, and she portrays the enigmatic Layla, “the princess of jihad (p. 399), as the emblem of its enticement. Layla will deliver the story’s magnificent climax. This novel is audacious and incisive, crafted by an author acutely aware of youth’s subtle yet profound aspects: its unease, fragility, and foolishness, and the potential for catastrophic exploitation.

Anita (Layla) articulates a longing for acknowledgement and affirmation, a profoundly human aspiration. The text “I don’t want to be hidden. I don’t want to be afraid to carry a book or read a poem” (p. 263) underscores the significance of visibility in our identities, implying that we should endeavour not merely to exist but to be recognised and comprehended. It addresses the intricacies of personal identity and illustrates the fundamental human desire for connection and recognition within society. Anita (Layla)’s desire to “I want to be free, like you” and “I want to be seen, like you are” (p. 264) makes her a rebellious and furious female character instead of a traditional submissive girl.

Upon meeting Anita (Layla) (Layla) at the American School of Karachi, Monty was captivated by her audacious, courageous, and enigmatic behavior. Bhutto states, “Monty wanted her because she was fearless” (p. 90). Her power stemmed from her fearlessness. Following Layla’s arrival, the feelings of unworthiness and diminished self-esteem dissipated from his existence. Bhutto powerfully draws a female character who makes men feel worthy by connecting with high-value women.

Anita (Layla) expresses a significant emotional reality concerning her sense of belonging. It embodies a prevalent sentiment among individuals navigating various domains, cultures, or circumstances. When confronted with conflicting values and expectations, numerous individuals grapple with their identities, resulting in a profound sense of dislocation. The text “‘I don’t belong anywhere,’ she said. 260” highlights the sense of isolation that may accompany personal transitions of the protagonist.

Another furious character is Rima, who was a source of inspiration for Anita (Layla). She yearns to be like her “That was who she wanted to be, the kind of girl who could forget someone in a week. Who didn’t need anyone, who wasn’t afraid, who was brave and free. A lioness who was not, and would never be, a man’s woman.” (p. 95). She transforms as Rima

“She could easily become the kind of woman Rima was (p. 95). Rima’s dialogue “You think I need anyone?” (p. 95) and lighting a cigarette from an elegant golden box present her as a symbol of autonomy and control in a gendered world that seeks to domesticate or subordinate women. Anita (Layla)’s internal response to Rima’s defiance, “That was who she wanted to be...” (p. 95), unveils a post-colonial feminist yearning for transformation. She admires Rima as a woman who is not “a man’s woman” (p. 95), a phrase encapsulates the desire to break from patriarchal ownership and identity through male validation. Rima’s language and gestures of the phone, cigarette, and golden box reveal that liberation is not just ideological—it is performed, often with aesthetic and rhetorical force. This resonates with post-colonial feminist attention to how women navigate the symbolic: how they dress, speak, or act to claim power or craft resistance.

In post-colonial societies, women’s sexuality is often tied to family honour, nationhood, or religious identity. Post-colonial feminism exposes how this rhetoric serves to police and confine women’s bodies and desires. *The Runaways* is loaded with post-colonial feminist themes, especially regarding the surveillance of female conduct, gendered mobility, political repression, and the internalisation of patriarchal dominance in post-colonial contexts. Post-colonial feminism examines how sexuality becomes a site of control and regulation through honour cultures, purity codes, and virginity norms. Feroze, a male character from the novel, did not like Anita (Layla) to come into his radical neighbour’s house, and he policed his sister, “You have to keep your head down, Feroze told his sister, don’t draw unnecessary attention to yourself” (p. 260).

Sunny and Naya’s beach scene is also portrayed as a gendered example of how the male and female honour code is different, and spotting a woman with a man can create an uncomfortable situation due to the honour and shame associated with women’s sexuality. Naya’s brother can have this luxury, but the same is forbidden for her. The text “Naya looked around, making sure there were no Chinese tourists clutching selfie-sticks and walking through on guided tours. She didn’t play it as white as her brother, was still scared to be spotted, terrified of getting caught by her parents” (p. 75) highlights the double standard of patriarchal society. The same case can be seen in the example of Layla and Monty when they meet in the classroom, and she always knew “She was being watched and she made no secret of enjoying the attention” (p. 90)

Conclusions

The study concludes that female characters in *The Runaways*, Anita (Layla) Rose (Layla), Naya and Zenobia, are persistently silenced through internalized shame, emotional suppression, and social surveillance structures deeply rooted in both colonial domination and patriarchal discipline. Bhutto explores themes of betrayal, violence, discrimination, marginalization, and subjugation of women through female characters. The novel portrays marginalization not merely as external oppression but as an inherited condition, where women have been conditioned to accept erasure, invisibility, and voicelessness as markers of survival. The women are systematically othered through discourses of respectability, religious conservatism, and socioeconomic hierarchy, reflecting how post-colonial societies reproduce colonial hierarchies through gendered power.

The characters’ emotional restraint, domestic trap, and limited mobility illustrate how the colonial past continues to shape the gendered present, rendering women as symbols of honour rather than subjects of agency. By foregrounding the silencing of female desire, labour, and voice, *The Runaways* reveals the enduring legacy of imperial and patriarchal ideologies that continue to dictate who speaks, who listens, and who remains unheard.

The study concludes that despite being constrained by oppressive systems, the women in *The Runaways* resist through subtle acts of defiance, emotional endurance, and reclaiming

their bodily autonomy. Characters like Anita (Layla), after transformation, and Rima exemplify a post-colonial feminist awakening, where resistance emerges not as loud revolution but as a gradual, interior transformation and rejection of dependency. The novel reframes liberation not as Western individualism but as a deeply situated, culturally embedded struggle to live, choose, and feel without fear or subjugation.

Through their evolving consciousness, rejection of shame, and yearning for agency, the female characters navigate a path that defies patriarchal and colonial narratives of what it means to be a woman. *The Runaways* asserts that post-colonial feminist liberation is not about absolute freedom but about carving out emotional, intellectual, and physical spaces where women reclaim their voice, identity, and desire.

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