

The Psychology of Radicalization: A Process Model Analysis of Fatima Bhutto's *The Runaways*

Ishtiaq Ahmad

Department of English Literature and linguistics, University of Malakand Chakadara Dir-Lower, Pakistan.

ishtiaquom100@gmail.com

Abstract

The present study explores the psychological journey of the major characters towards the radicalization process in Fatima Bhutto's novel The Runaways. It focuses on the mechanical group behaviors of these characters during the whole process. The study uses John Horgan's process model of terrorism as a theoretical framework for the analysis of these major characters. It outlines three stages of radicalization: becoming a terrorist, being a terrorist and disengagement. The study uses this model to interpret how psychological vulnerabilities of the major characters are exploited and transformed within the context of jihad. Methodologically, the study is qualitative in nature while employing textual analysis through close-reading and narrative interpretation. It focuses on psychological cues, symbols, characters monologue and interaction that reflect their psychological transformation. The findings suggest that Bhutto's novel portrays radicalization as a process rooted in psychological reasons, rather than political or religious motives. This process begins with emotional dissatisfaction and personal confusion, where individuals experience isolation, invisibility and identity crisis. Then, this inner conflict grows deeper and consequently Anita Rose and Sunny become increasingly vulnerable to alternative ideologies that offer them a belonging or purpose. It also explores the role of human ideologues and role figures who manipulate these individuals for recruitment or make a way for their radicalization. Extremist groups provide a sense of self-hood and new identity to fractured individuals. In the next stage, these individuals adopt new roles and absorb radical identities where they derive meaning in symbolic transformation and structured belief systems. Moreover, the process moves toward disillusionment or disengagement, often marked by inner conflict, emotional fatigue, or shifting group dynamics. Finally, the findings suggest that radicalization of the jihadis is a complex emotional journey, where psychological needs are exploited, redefined, and ritualized within extremist context. By treating fiction as a site of psychological inquiry, this study provides a fresh and emotionally grounded perspective to the study of radicalization.

1. Introduction

Fatima Bhutto is a Pakistani writer and columnist. She born in Kabul Afghanistan on 29 May 1982 and raised in Syria. She belongs to a political family, The Bhutto family. She is the daughter of politician Murtaza Bhutto and grand-daughter of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Her father's controversial death had a profound impact on her worldview. Despite her political lineage, Fatima Bhutto has chosen to influence society through her writing. Her writing explore the complexities of life in Pakistan and the effect of political conflicts especially on young people. Her debut work *Whisper of the Dessert* published in 1998. Her memoir *Songs of Blood and Sword* (2010) narrates her personal and political history. While her fictions *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* (2013) and *The Runaways* (2019) dives into emotional and psychological forces of contemporary world conflict, identity crisis, and radicalization. In *The Runaways* Fatima Bhutto challenges the simplest media narrative that reduced radicalization to stereotypes and brings a humanized lens to the process of radicalization especially among youth.

The Runaways by Fatima Bhutto is a strong literary portrayal of the social, psychological, and emotional conditions that push people toward radicalization in the contemporary world. This novel provides a humanized and profoundly reflective examination of the reasons how some young individuals decide to give up their normal lives and adopt extremist beliefs in a world where terrorism is frequently examined through political, religious, or security-based perspective. In spite

of their different upbringings, the three characters in the novel, Anita Rose from Karachi, Sunny from Portsmouth, and Monty from a wealthy British-Pakistani family, arrive at the same place of terrorism. Due to their emotional scars, social alienation, and spiritual discontent, all of the characters are vulnerable to radical influence.

Radicalization in the modern world frequently arises from psychological voids such as feelings of invisibility, purposelessness, emotional neglect, and identity confusion rather than from rigid ideologies. Bhutto portrays terrorism as a gradual psychological journey influenced by internal conflicts and external failures rather than a single decision. Anita Rose grows up in extreme poverty and carries the wounds of marginalization. Her life is characterized by ongoing social exclusion, self-discontent, and a profound sense of social invisibility. She is particularly vulnerable to ideological grooming because of her emotional instability and quest for meaning. Osama Shah, a gentle mentor and an old Marxist, becomes her ideologue who validates her intelligence through revolutionary poetry and political ideology, so that she starts to reconstruct her broken identity and find meaning in extremist ideas. She gradually moves from passive anger to ideological commitment, taking on the identity of Layla, a symbol of power, rebirth, and purpose. However, Anita experiences an emotional and psychological breakdown as the promises of sisterhood and dignity start to crumble under coercion and control. Sunny, on the other hand, a second-generation son of an Indian immigrant, is caught between two societies. Ozz, his cousin, returns from Syria and becomes a human ideologue for him, filling the void in Sunny's life by offering him not just a belief system but a stage on which to be seen.

By using the process model of terrorism, this study focuses on the psychological transformation of the major characters and psychological factors that contribute to their journey. It examines how they move from invisible individuals to committed terrorists. The novel becomes a valuable resource for examining the intricate process of radicalization, which involves mentor recruitment, ideological exposure, emotional dissatisfaction, and ultimately, acceptance of violence.

1.1 Problem Statement

The novel *The Runaways* by Fatima Bhutto presents the radicalization of youth as a result of psychological and personal response to isolation, identity crises and marginalization. This study explores how such social factors drive characters like Anita Rose and Sunny toward radicalization. This research explores the process of radicalization.

1.2 Research Questions

1. How does Fatima Bhutto's novel project the radicalization of the major characters? 2. How do psychological factors contribute to the journey of radicalization of the major characters?

1.3 Research Objectives

1. To explore the radicalization of the major characters in Fatima Bhutto's novel *The Runaways*.
2. To explore the contribution of psychological factors behind radicalization of the major characters.

1.4 Methodology

Methodologically, this study is qualitative and interpretative, based on the textual analysis of Fatima Bhutto's *The Runaways*. The study utilizes close reading for textual analysis of the literary text. The novel is used as primary source while relevant journals and research papers are consulted

as secondary sources. The study uses the process model of terrorism as theoretical framework which views radicalization as a gradual psychological process occurring in three stages: becoming a terrorist, being a terrorist and disengagement. This theoretical model is used to interpret the psychological transformation of the major characters through emotional, psychological and behavioral development.

1.5 Theoretical Framework

This research follows John Horgan's process model of terrorism. It views radicalization as a gradual and psychological process which occurs in three distinct phases: becoming a terrorist, being a terrorist and disengagement. Horgan challenges the individual approaches that focus only on the definition of terrorism, emphasizing instead on the behavior of the terrorist. Horgan argues that individuals pass through a sequence of psychological changes. In the becoming a terrorist phase, individual experiences of life, the role of a human ideologue, and lures and features of the terrorist group make them attracted toward extremism. The being a terrorist phase involves role adoption, obedience to authority, normalization and justification of violence, characterized by routine behavior, suppression of individual identity and moral disengagement. The final phase, disengagement, involves the physical and psychological detachment of individuals from the group. This framework provides a lens to examine the psychological transformation of the major characters in *The Runaways*, particularly Anita Rose and Sunny, exploring how they become radicalized over time due to personal and psychological reasons, not just ideology.

1.6 Literature Review

Fatima Bhutto's *The Runaways* has caught the interest of many readers and scholars over the past few years, who have interpreted the story from perspectives such as identity, culture, politics, and social issues. Sani, Iqbal, Javed and Munawar analyzed the novel through the lens of Stuart Hall's theory of representation, investigating how the main characters struggle against the roles and labels that society forces on them, and how Bhutto portrays the lasting impact of colonialism on identity. Bhatti and Malik used Freudian psychoanalytical theory to explain how unconscious thoughts and childhood experiences shape the characters' behavior, finding that Monty joins mainly out of love for Layla while Sunny's low self-esteem and betrayal by his cousin Oz push him toward the group. Khan, Saif and Sahar analyzed the novel through Simone de Beauvoir's feminist lens, exploring how women are given inferior positions in patriarchal society and how retaining an original identity, as Layla does, helps women maintain a sense of self. Kharal, Naseem and Muhammad used Freud's concept of displacement together with Lyotard's and Baudrillard's narrative theory to argue that the characters do not join jihad because of Islam, but are pushed to such extremes because they find no other solution to poverty, social injustice and rejection. Ashraf and Hussain used Neuman's understanding of radicalization to show that injustice, poverty and identity crisis, rather than personal will, compel the characters to join extremist groups. Ahmad and Mustafa examined how post-9/11 experiences of capitalism, modernity and isolation, rather than religion, contribute to the characters' radicalization. Rabbi, Hassan and Kurd highlighted how confusion, fear and helplessness make young characters directionless, driving them toward terrorist organizations through bad friendships, love, rejection and economic deprivation rather than religion. Khan used Miller and Chauhan's method to explore the push and pull factors behind each character's radicalization, rooted in socio-economic deprivation for Layla, identity crisis for Sunny, and love for Monty.

These studies, while important, often rely on broader social or political explanations and can sometimes overlook the individual, human side of the story. In contrast, this research takes a different path. Instead of viewing terrorism only through these conventional lenses, it explores the novel through John Horgan's process model of terrorist involvement, a psychological framework that looks closely at how individuals come to make such extreme choices. By applying this model to *The Runaways*, this study aims to highlight the personal struggles, emotional shifts and psychological stages that lead characters down the path of radicalization, adding a more intimate, human-centered understanding that moves beyond theory to focus on the inner lives of those who make these difficult and often tragic decisions.

2. Becoming a Terrorist: Anita Rose and Sunny's Journey

Terrorism became one of the emerging issues in the world after the incident of 9/11. The West starts associating terrorism with religious ideology especially with Islam, as a result there is a global rise in Islamophobia. The West media and politics provide an oversimplified understanding of radicalization, emphasizing religion as the primary motivating factor for terrorism. But over time, researchers explore that this explanation is not satisfactory, since people from different backgrounds join terrorism, most with little or no knowledge of religion. Contemporary researchers reject the old paradigm of radicalization based upon religion or ideology; instead, they argue radicalization is an ongoing and gradual process, deeply psychological, emotional and social. It does not happen due to some sudden brainwashing. This aligns with John Horgan's process model of terrorism (2005), which emphasizes that radicalization is not the result of a single belief or event but a step-by-step, slow and gradual process shaped by many psychological factors that make individuals more sensitive to extremist narratives.

John Horgan outlines the main elements that lead to a person's slow descent into terrorism: the legitimization of violence, identification as an attraction, openness to socialization, and trigger events. Horgan argues that people do not suddenly turn into terrorists; rather, their involvement develops gradually through emotional susceptibility, ideological training, self-dissatisfaction, and community or mentor support. These components provide a framework for analyzing how Sunny and Anita Rose in *The Runaways* make the shift from marginalized people to radicalized participants in a terrorist organization.

Anita Rose is portrayed as a sixteen-year-old Christian girl living in the slum of Macher Colony, Karachi. Her early life is marked by poverty, emotional neglect, class-based humiliation and social isolation. Her father is dead, and her mother Zenobia is the only source of income, working as a *malishwali* for rich women. Anita Rose witnesses her mother's physical and emotional exhaustion daily, laying the psychological groundwork for her journey. Her family lives in a one-room home with hardly any space to sleep, dependent on neighbors for the smallest things: "We don't have any gas left, nothing to cook with" (p.18). Anita Rose does not want to depend on anyone no matter how much she suffers; she is in internal conflict, not wanting to ask for things and wanting to maintain her dignity. "She wanted to tell her mama that it made her stomach hurt to go there and ask" (p.18). She learns early that asking for things is shameful and humiliating, and these experiences plant the seeds of emotional vulnerability.

Anita Rose faces bullying during her school life, apart from poverty. Her classmates bully her physically, kicking her and throwing her books off the desk, and use abusive language to humiliate her: "Kutee k bacche, No one wants you here" (p.20). These verbal abuses dehumanize Anita Rose's dignity and deepen her sense of shame, isolating her further from the society she belongs to. The classroom represents the community that imposes its cruelty upon those who are powerless.

Anita Rose's value and status in society becomes clear to her at the Clifton house, which she often visits, observing the lives of its inhabitants from a distance in silence. "Her heart had ached with a longing she didn't understand" (p.32). The Clifton house is not merely a physical space but a symbol of the visibility, respect and status that is not hers. The elite built a separate staircase for servants so as not to disturb the rich; Anita Rose realizes her presence is tolerated only as long as she stays behind the laundry room's door. Her habit of feeding caged birds at the Clifton house and making patterns of birdseed on the earth as an "anti-trap designed for liberty" (p.45) represents her psychological longing for freedom, though "the birds always landed back inside" (p.45), reflecting her internalized fear that she too will remain controlled.

In this critical stage of her life, interaction with Osama Shah represents a pivotal moment in Anita Rose's psychological growth. Osama was the quiet neighbor from whom Anita's family borrowed salt, matches, candles and pencils, until she appears at his door hurt by Mira's words. He gently asks her, "Who dares make a lion cry?" (p.57), recognizing the strength in her which she is unable to see in herself. Osama Shah introduces her to poetry not as an art but "a weapon, devastating and fatal" (p.57). Anita learns that language is not only a tool for knowledge but a form of empowerment; the words she had memorized, such as corruption, fraud, hypocrisy and Zionist, turn to poetic resistance. Osama Shah's recitation of "Rise like lions after slumber in unvanquishable number" (p.57) gives Anita Rose a vision that validates her rebellion, connecting her with the lineage of resistance through the poetry of Hafiz, Ghalib, Faiz and others. He promises her, "I will teach you... Together we will shake your chains to the earth like dew" (p.57), becoming an ideological figure who offers space for her political consciousness to grow. He exposes her to revolutionary books such as *Wretched of the Earth*, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, *Discovery of India* and Soviet Life magazines, which become the source of empowerment that replaces her emotional abandonment with ideological transformation.

Osama Shah takes Anita Rose to the Press Club, exposing her to a true political arena for the first time, where she observes demonstrators wearing "black armbands" illuminated by "oil lamps" (p.71), realizing that her suffering is political rather than personal. Under Osama Shah's guidance, Anita starts to acquire direction and clarity, although her emotional and psychological development remains unstable. Meanwhile her brother Ezra, now calling himself "Feroze," represents a paradoxical transformational paradigm rooted in deceit, performance, and adjustment to unjust power structures rather than truth and resistance. He tells her, "We deserve better and we're going to get it" (p.93), and begins controlling her appearance and behavior, instructing her to "lie low, don't draw unnecessary attention" (p.168). Osama Shah warns her, "Anita Rose, you don't belong to this jungle" (p.156), yet Anita Rose feels she doesn't belong anywhere and accepts the identity of Lyla in hope of visibility: "Calls me Lyla, it's who I am now" (p.158). Osama warns her, "this city will take your heart" (p.158), emphasizing that "you fight by standing exactly where you are" (p.158), but Lyla takes the new name as a way of fighting and survival.

The promises of Feroze break and become a trauma for Lyla when he takes her to Dubai and sells her to his clients: "if it goes well, if they are happy, we will be set, forever" (p.169). Disillusioned, Lyla tells Osama Shah, "I am heartsick, not for home. Not for anyone, no human soul. Heartsick for the promise of a new world" (p.184), reflecting her deep alienation and longing to escape to a world where her pain has meaning. Osama Shah tells her, "You're no one, my lion—you're everyone" (p.183). Abu Khalid, the leader of the Ummah Movement, contacts her after watching her videos, recognizing her power: "People were watching, millions of people. The world's eyes were upon them... upon her" (p.163). He asks if she is ready to "take her message to the

battlefields" (p.163), offering her a role that turns her suffering into power in exchange for her voice: "Your voice... your struggle" (p.163).

Sunny, a nineteen-year-old second-generation immigrant, son of Sulaiman Jamil, is born in Portsmouth, England, but is neither accepted by British White society nor entirely connected with his cultural roots. His early life is marked by the absence of his mother; he raises in the shadow of his father, whose own unfulfilled dreams and failed migration project a heavy psychological burden onto Sunny. Sulaiman Jamil imposes his expectations: "Be someone else. Be something else. Be better. Fit in more." (p.21). Sunny gives up his interest in Islamic history and cricket to study business, as "there was no money in that, no future" (p.24). His father's assimilationist anxieties, shaped by colonial ideology and immigrant hardship, become a psychological burden rather than an inspiration.

Sunny questions why they always imitate the West, "why do we always ape the West?" (p.33), showing his early rejection of a life of imitation, yet his act of rejection remains unseen. He attempts to connect through romantic relationships that reflect his search for validation, but both White and Desi girls use him for their own purposes rather than seeing him. His relationship with his childhood acquaintance Ben, a symbol of internalized racism who calls himself Christian and becomes Islamophobic to gain social acceptance, deepens Sunny's humiliation; Ben bullies both Sunny and a Jewish classmate David, calling Sunny "Taliban" and sending a bomb emoji, creating in Sunny a sense of shared victimhood with David. Rejected by both communities, Sunny turns to social media, discovering Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X, both outsiders in the West who found identity through Islam. Ali recalls his embrace of Islam: "you say as Salam alaikum, you got a home, you got a brother anywhere in the world" (p.34). Sunny begins learning Arabic and Islamic history, but despite his efforts to connect with a religious community, he remains invisible, deepening his isolation and disillusionment.

Sunny withdraws to the gym, a place for the emotionally wounded, "The kind of place you went to train, to destroy your body so you could build it up again... alone in the company of others who were also hiding, transforming" (p.36), where he meets Stefan, a trainer who accepts him without judgment: "Stefan, understood, without Sunny having to say anything" (p.36). But this relationship becomes traumatic when Stefan brings him to a gay bar, triggering shame and sexual confusion; "Why would anyone care about Sunny without wanting something from him" (p.38) captures his sense of emotional betrayal. Sunny retreats into isolation, becomes obsessed with the character Omer from *The Wire*, and finds comfort in Frank Ocean's lyrics, which feel written for him. His despair deepens into dangerous games with fate and thoughts questioning his existence: "How long must a man walk through this city with no armour?" (p.39). He turns to the mosque out of desperation rather than spiritual insight, but finds himself further alienated by the generational and cultural gap: "I don't know why I'm here," he says to the imam, nearly crying (p.53).

The return of his cousin Ozz marks a turning point. Ozz returns from Syria transformed, radiant with confidence and purpose, "There was something radiant, even beautiful, about him" (p.65). Ozz tells Sunny, "You're looking everywhere but the right place" (p.64), criticizes local mosques as compromised institutions "bowing to the white man and his 'prevent extremism' agenda" (p.65), and reconnects Sunny to a sense of Islamic glory: "They forgot the glory of Islam!" (p.65). Ozz frames the West as morally corrupt and Muslims as a marginalized periphery, "We're the periphery... They'll never accept us" (p.66), and reframes capitalism as a system designed to exclude the marginalized. Sunny gradually gives away his belongings and distances himself from his old life, accepting the offer of the Ummah Movement, "a source that acknowledged his pain." Ozz promises, "We'll fight together" (p.90), and prepares Sunny's travel to Syria. Even as Sunny

finds unexpected peace with Aloush, a DJ at Apollo, the pressure from Ozz proves stronger. Sunny finally leaves Portsmouth with the belief that "brothers don't come back. They go to die" (p.96). At every checkpoint along the way, his illusions strip away; he arrives "as sick as dog, feeling alone and slightly humiliated for believing in Oz" (p.98), and when Abu Khalid asks his reason for coming, Sunny replies "because I believe" (p.99), a line taught to him rather than his own conviction.

Sunny and Anita Rose's journey toward terrorism is not sudden. Their paths to radicalization are motivated by intensely personal traumas rather than ideologies. Neither character is looking for conflict; rather, they are looking for acceptance, respect, and a place where their suffering is acknowledged and understood. Their radical decisions have nothing to do with politics or religion; they are about identity, survival, and the intense desire to matter in a society that has never taken them seriously. The terrorist group offers them the promise of visibility and purpose; they do not choose this dangerous path for violence but for belonging.

3. Being a Terrorist: The Ontology of Layla and Sunny

Radicalization does not end with the individual's recruitment into the group. After recruitment, engagement becomes deeper and gradually turns to routine. The individual enters the second phase of the process model, "being a terrorist," characterized by obedience to authority, deindividuation (the loss of personal identity in favor of group identity), routinization (the normalization of violent acts as part of daily life), and justification of violence. The engagement of Sunny and Layla into the Ummah Movement is not marked by a single moment; they begin to follow directions without questioning them, and their thoughts, feelings and actions align with the group's desires.

Layla's involvement is presented as a gradual transformation into a branded ideological figure rather than through conventional militarization. The names she picks up in Iraq—"Bride of Damascus," "Daughter of Jihad," "Pride of the Martyrs," and "Niece of Struggle" (p.107)—are branding tools rather than intimate titles, marking the deindividuation of Layla as propaganda absorbs her identity. Abu Khalid had told her bluntly during their first encounter, "Your voice, that's what I want. Your struggle" (p.163), recruiting her not for leadership or combat but for her symbolic capital. Her most famous video opens with controlled calm: "We will not spare the liars of Ninawa" (p.104), her practiced, deliberate voice replacing the Layla of Karachi with the polished face of a terrorist campaign. She speaks Arabic "as though she had been speaking their accents all her life" (p.104), a fluidity that is learned, not natural—performative rather than spiritual.

Layla obeys the directions of video production without protest, saying simply, "Set the camera up" (p.164), reflecting the innumerable times she has carried out this rite. When boys quarrel over the table's placement, she says bluntly, "We don't have time for this" (p.163), her focus on efficiency over emotion illustrating routinization in action. She is always moving, "never sleeping in the same place," and "always being guarded by four or five brothers" (p.164); her phone, representing independence, is taken away, promised a replacement only "after Nineveh"—a goal that never arrives.

Sunny's engagement deepens through the desert march to Nineveh. He cradles his Kalashnikov like a lover, whispering "What a beautiful little thing you are" (p.115), the weapon becoming an object of intimacy that reflects the internalization of militant identity. He carefully estimates his phone's battery life rather than seeking connection, prioritizing tasks over meaning—a routinization that dulls moral reasoning. Yet fragments of the former Sunny remain: reading emails from banks his father admired, he thinks, "I heard you clearly, Pa. I'm not genuine; I'm not good

enough. I am invisible and nothing" (p.115), and pleads, "Remake me then, remake me into something beautiful" (p.115), attempting to transform suffering into meaning. He deletes his father's emails and tweets "Imma wear my name," reclaiming an identity built on rebellion rather than his father's expectations. When his cousin Oz, once his ideological pillar who told him "Islam is a battlefield, bro" (p.119), goes silent, Sunny's response shifts from longing to moral censure: "You ain't no Muslim, bruv" (p.119). His scarred body becomes a vessel of sacrifice; his suffering—the "pink scalp," "bedbug scabs," and "shock training" (p.119)—becomes his moral capital, validating his role the more he endures hardship.

In the emptiness of the desert night, Sunny finds solace performing for an online audience, posting a photo of a stray kitten beside his weapon with the caption "#jihadtourism #catsofjihad" (p.123). The likes flood in, and his body reacts as though "resurrected"; he is no longer invisible. He responds to comments with practiced humility, "All is thanks to Him" (p.123), carefully controlling his tone. He envisions leaving behind a legacy: "Imma make a name for myself out here" (p.124), imagining a name that will "crest over the bodies of them that fought me" (p.124). His jihad becomes something observable and exalted, his camera a weapon and his followers witnesses. When Monty asks how selfies are part of the battle, Sunny answers scornfully, "Ever heard of propaganda?" (p.124).

After the Mosul dam incident, Sunny finds meaning not through strategic reasoning but through faith: "all of this struggle here means something. God has a purpose" (p.128). His suffering becomes divine choreography rather than a sign of failure. He mocks Monty's fear, sneering "You don't hear me crying" (p.128), reaffirming his own ideological strength through contempt for his companion. He returns alone to the abandoned dam, demonstrating obedience without direct authority, concluding "Everything had a purpose" (p.128)—loyalty without justification.

Sunny's dissociation deepens in Tal Afar, where fragments of Frank Ocean's "Swim Good" resurface, a haunting rather than consoling reminder of a buried identity. He rationalizes continuing the fight by invoking Oz's own teaching despite Oz's betrayal, later declaring on Tumblr, "I'm a wolf, I don't need no one, just me alone, crying at the moon... Through the simple force of faith, I will extinguish this house and emerge from the ashes" (p.179), reframing emotional desertion as divine fortitude. When he witnesses the brothers torturing a dog in the desert, his silence is not approval but paralysis; he later dismisses the incident to Monty: "Some idiots torturing an animal late at night doesn't change what we're doing, Monty" (p.191), a strategic moral disengagement rather than moral confusion. Alone at night, he murmurs to himself, "It was just a dog" (p.191), attempting to override his instinctive discomfort with ideology.

Sunny's scathing email calling Oz "an apostate," "Judas," and "Brutus" (p.195) reveals a psyche still bound to personal betrayal but cloaked in political rhetoric. His jealousy of Oz's public visibility disguises itself as righteousness; his declaration "I'm flying straight to Paradise" (p.196) is a fantasy of acceptance rather than a statement of faith. He represses memories of Aloush, the Apollo Café, and his father, an act of willful denial that transforms alienation into ideological rage. His firing of his rifle into the air is a performative outburst of inner pain rather than tactical necessity, his heart "pounding, beating against his breastbone" (p.197). Arriving in Nineveh, Monty's silence leaves him still unacknowledged; he mocks, "No thanks for protecting me all this way" (p.217), craving an intimacy that never comes. Sam's welcome, "God delivered you safely," feels transactional rather than sentimental, and Sam's certainty, "That's why I love jihad, you commit and Allah clears the way" (p.218), only deepens Sunny's sense of invisibility: "no one will ever know Sunny Jamil suffered, no one will ever see the lost glory... the tortures he endured" (p.218).

At the execution site, Abu Khalid stages the killing of prisoners as ritual indoctrination, declaring "Today we take Ninawa" (p.223) in a prophecy-like tone that arouses the recruits' collective identity. When Layla is accused of betrayal after a leaked video, Abu Khalid selects Sunny and Monty to "purify the tribe" (p.240), and gives Sunny a new identity, "Abu Ninawa" (p.238), reframing individual trauma into institutional belonging. Sunny accepts, "It's an honor" (p.224), learning the rationalization of violence in the name of virtue. He prepares for Layla's execution as performance rather than punishment, taking opium as ritual, smoothing his beard, and repositioning his bullets so he "looks fly for the video" (p.248). His statement "I've been seen" (p.248), echoing his need for his father's approval, "Pa, I been seen. Do you now love me?" (p.248), reveals that his transformation into a soldier is shaped by visibility rather than conviction. In the garage, confronting Layla with theatrical swagger, his declaration "I'm a soldier" becomes a desperate claim of worth. When Layla headbutts him, his rage stems from wounded pride rather than pain. In his final moments, stabbed by Monty, he worries about staining his boots rather than the wound itself, his last thought aesthetic—that the moment seemed "somehow more beautiful than when they had first met." His tragic ending confirms that Sunny's transformation into a terrorist was never rooted in belief or discipline but in fractured identity and a desperate need for relevance.

Layla and Sunny both demonstrate a thorough internalization of their positions within the ideology. Their identities embed into the activities they perform; their obedience to authority becomes unquestioned and violence a routine. They stop acting as individuals and instead become extensions of the cause itself through routinization, deindividuation and the repression of doubt.

4. Disengagement: Layla's Return from the Jihadist Journey

According to John Horgan, disengagement is a slow, complex process that doesn't always entail ideological rejection. Rather, psychological changes like disillusionment, emotional exhaustion, or a growing sense of doubt are frequently the first signs of disengagement. Horgan also talks about physical disengagement, which entails role changes frequently enforced by the group, such as demotion, marginalization, or removal due to scandal or mistrust.

Layla's disengagement starts subtly behind the scenes of her outward behavior. Her emotional attachment to the cause has begun to decrease, but she still performs, memorizing her lines and giving orders to the boys; routine takes the place of her ideological fire. As she looks out a "filthy, smudged window," her desire for freedom and warmth is emotional rather than ideological; the promises made to her now stand in stark contrast to the reality of walls, silence, and suspicion. Her phone, her only means of communication with the outside world, has been taken "for her own safety," according to Abu Khalid, though autonomy is sacrificed for control. When Layla briefly mistakes an ice cream cart's melody for a song of Eric Clapton, hoping someone remembers who she was, "something inside her cracks as the illusion disappears"—an emotional outburst that shows her attachment gradually eroding.

In her notebook, Layla writes continuously, alternating between memories and regret, "until all her days blurred into one long, painful commemoration" (p.164), a repetitive cycle reflecting emotional rumination and cognitive exhaustion. Brockner and Rubin's concept of "decisional no-man's land"—where a person has invested too much to abandon a path but cannot see a clear way forward—describes her position (p.126). Adriana Faranda's reflection on life in the Red Brigades echoes Layla's detachment, isolating her from everyday pleasures. "How far she had travelled, only to find herself back behind closed doors, locked inside, waiting for news of the outside world" (p.163) captures her emotional and physical isolation.

Layla recalls sensory, personal memories—the beach, crabs, rain puddles, monsoons, the smell of gasoline—that Horgan refers to as the psychological seeds of disengagement, wherein emotional and personal needs subtly begin to surpass ideological commitment. "She had been happy" (p.241) captures the essence of Horgan's theory: even without overt defection, the yearning for a normal life can become a top emotional priority and precipitate disengagement. Her identity becomes unstable, names and memories blurring: "Anita Rose, never as sweet. A name by any other means" (p.242).

Layla's disengagement becomes both psychological and physical when she becomes the target of institutional anger. When Abu Khalid describes her leaked video as having "brought shame to our brothers and to our cause" (p.248), the symbolic undoing begins; her red notebook, once a sign of her devotion, is now interpreted as proof of deceit and thrown away. Abu Khalid declares, "She is a liar... she has been under our noses... deceiving us" (p.239), and Layla loses her personal journey, becoming a risk to be eliminated. In the garage scene, her disengagement reaches its cruel final stage: her face beaten, her mouth bound, her body tied to a chair—a total organizational rejection rather than a voluntary withdrawal. When Sunny snarls, "you ever played with fire?... You ever got burned?" (p.246), she no longer retaliates ideologically; she sobs. When she looks to Monty and whispers "Monty," it is Anita Rose reaching out from within Layla, personal rather than political. Yet she asserts agency despite her pain, giving Sunny a headbutt and looking up at Monty with recognition—the last signs of disengagement rather than the behavior of someone broken.

Rather than ending in victory, Layla's journey ends in silence. She was once the face of the Ummah Movement but now lacks voice, authority, and belonging. Her resistance, memories, and past are reduced to pieces of suffering, and the movement she dedicated her life to deserts her. Ultimately, Layla is just a woman forgotten by the revolution she helped bring about, neither a martyr nor a hero.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the psychological journey of Anita Rose and Sunny in Fatima Bhutto's *The Runaways* through John Horgan's process model of terrorism, tracing how both characters move from invisible, marginalized individuals to committed terrorists and, in Layla's case, toward eventual disengagement. Anita Rose's life in the slums of Karachi is marked by poverty, class-based humiliation and social invisibility, deepened by her mother's exhausting labor and her own experiences of bullying and shame. Osama Shah, a gentle mentor and old Marxist, becomes her ideologue, using poetry and revolutionary literature to transform her wounds into a language of resistance and offer her the identity of Layla, a symbol of rebirth and power. Sunny, torn between his British upbringing and his family's Pakistani roots, experiences cultural dissonance, his father's expectations, and rejection from both his White and Desi communities, falling into quiet despair. Figures like Ozz and Osama Shah, offering symbolic roles, ideological justification, and emotional support, fill the void both characters experience, becoming their role models and ideologues. The primary psychological and deeply personal reasons for adopting radical ideologies in both characters are the need to be seen, to belong, and to matter. In this situation, terrorism is not a predestined decision, but rather an emotional reaction to the void created by invisibility, neglect, and rejection.

John Horgan and other psychologists have pointed out that terrorism frequently has a strong "pull factor" because it offers people who have long felt helpless or invisible a sense of belonging, status, redemption, and certainty. The "being terrorists" phase, as demonstrated by Horgan's framework and textual evidence, focuses on how ideology is internalized through performance, obedience,

and repetition rather than necessarily through strong faith. Layla becomes a propaganda icon of the group, her speeches prewritten, her appearance managed, and her voice styled to fit a media brand, becoming a spokesperson for someone else's war instead of taking ownership of her own. Sunny, meanwhile, combines digital aesthetics with militancy, staging rifles next to kittens and finding strength in hashtags; visibility and recognition from strangers motivate him more than jihad itself. Their radicalized selves are based on routine and performance rather than moral clarity, and the need to prove their worth to the cause consumes their everyday lives, normalizes violence, and suppresses emotion.

Disengagement, the third stage, starts with emotional exhaustion rather than ideological rejection. Layla gradually begins to fall apart; her movement is restricted, she loses access to the outside world, and even though her voice is widely broadcast, it no longer feels like her own. She repeatedly rewrites her Arabic lines, losing sight of what is learned and what is true. Quiet confusion, emotional isolation, and a loss of purpose characterize her disengagement.

Together, these arguments imply that radicalization, as depicted in *The Runaways*, is a diversion through emotional suffering rather than a path to religious conviction. It is a human tale of manipulation, desire, and invisibility. Layla and Sunny's ideological language is a costume they have adopted for survival, belonging, and perceived strength rather than always reflecting their beliefs. Instead of starting out with the intention of killing or controlling, these characters want to be heard, seen, and to turn the stigma of marginalization into a myth of power. Their change illustrates how terrorism is becoming increasingly intertwined with image politics, mediated communication, and symbolic warfare—a change in which psychological needs are carried out through ideology rather than concealed beneath it. *The Runaways* defies a straightforward causal theory of terrorism in this regard; it criticizes the ideologies that exploit alienation as well as the societies that create it. Fatima Bhutto's story offers a more unsettling truth than the dichotomies of good and evil, believer and unbeliever, East and West: radicalization is a story of misrecognition, of being misread by the world and then misreading one's place within it. This study illustrates that damaged desire, not doctrine or theology but psychology, is at the core of ideological violence. These characters are escaping isolation, abandonment, and invisibility, and that is more important to them than who recruits them. As a result, the radical act involves not just joining a group but also rewriting one's identity, even if that new identity is created through loss and violence.

However, this study also carries limitations. By focusing primarily on a literary analysis grounded in Horgan's psychological model, the research does not explore wider socio-political contexts such as the role of geopolitics, gendered power structures, or transnational recruitment networks that could further deepen understanding of these transformations. Additionally, the interpretation of characters is necessarily subjective, rooted in literary scenes rather than empirical data. Further research might compare Bhutto's fictional portrayal of radicalization with real-world autobiographies or interviews of former militants to assess how closely these psychological phases align with lived experiences. Researchers could also expand the scope by studying female radicalization narratives across other South Asian or Middle Eastern literatures, exploring how gender and class intersect in the making and unmaking of terrorists. A comparative study across different ideological contexts—Islamist, nationalist, or white supremacist—may also provide a broader view of how emotional vulnerability and performance manifest across ideologies.

Finally, this study offers more than a story of radicalization; it presents a mirror to the emotional landscape of those on the margins. Through the humanization of Layla and Sunny, the novel, and this research, remind us that behind every ideological mask, there is often a wounded person searching for meaning, voice, and visibility.

References

- Ahmad, H., & Mustafa, S. (2023). The roots of radicalism: Analyzing post-9/11 situation in *The Runaways* by Fatima Bhutto. *City University Research Journal of Literature & Linguistics*, 6(2).
- Ashraf, J., & Hussain, S. (2022). Factors behind radicalization: Analysis of Fatima Bhutto's *The Runaways*. *Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow*, 22(1), 285.
- Iftikhar, N., Saddique, K., & Nawaz, A. (2022). Projection of denial as a defense mechanism in Fatima Bhutto's novel *The Runaways*. *Global Sociological Review*, VII(II), 248–254.
- Khan, R. N. (2023). Exploring radicalization in Fatima Bhutto's *The Runaways*. *Pakistan Journal of Society, Education and Language (PJSEL)*, 10(1), 514–529.
- Kharal, Q. A., & Muhammad, H. (2022). Deconstructing the metanarrative of jihadism: A postmodern study of Fatima Bhutto's novel *The Runaways*. *Journal of English Language Literature and Education*, 3(4), 36–53.
- Rabbi, A., Hassan, S., & Kurd, S. A. (2023). Alienation in *The Runaways* (a novel by Fatima Bhutto): A psychoanalytical reasoning for fundamentalism and radicalization. *Al-Qanṭara*, 9(1).
- Sahar, Z., Saif, F., & Khan, F. S. (2024). Women as 'others' in Bhutto's *The Runaways*: A feminist analysis. *Pakistan Social Sciences Review*, 8(1), 460–467.
- Sani, S. A., Iqbal, Z., Javed, Y., Munawar, Z., Abdullah, A., & Tariq, A. (2024). Representation of others and resistance: A postcolonial study of Fatima Bhutto's *The Runaways* (2018). *Arbor*.
- Sarwar, I., Bhatti, M. Q., & Malik, M. T. (2023). Inspecting core issues of male protagonists in *The Runaways* by Fatima Bhutto: A Freudian psychoanalytic study. *Annals of Human and Social Sciences*, 4(3), 426–434.