



Trial of a Witch

TIASHA IDRAK

"Greetings, fellow children of God," the Holy man greeted. "We've assembled on this prosperous day. When we get rid of this sinful being, one who has led so many of our youths astray. Sinful, vile, one who committed debauchery—let us pray as we sacrifice this witch in the flames of the Almighty," the Pastor shouted, his voice dripping with conviction.

"Hear, hear," the audience cheered.

The criminal in question, Matilda swayed on the pile of firewood.
The rope bit down into her hand, her eyes—empty.
The pastor's voice didn't reach her.
She was somewhere else.
She heard a voice screaming, it was her own.
Hands mauling her body.
Her breasts.
Pressing her down.
Bruises on her thighs.
Monsters, violently intruding.
Yet how come she was the witch?
Matilda looked up and saw the audience watching her with gleeful cruelty.

Eyes laced with hatred and malice.
As the pastor torched the pyre, Matilda had a single thought.
"I don't want to be here."

Centuries later in a dimly lit room, Nadia sat staring at the cyberspace.
She put her head under the blanket, hiding from the world.
She furiously scrolled down the comments, a futile attempt to shove away the virtual fingers of judgement pointing at her.
"She deserved it"
"Slut!"
"What was she wearing?"

Throwing the phone away, Nadia reached towards her bedside table.
As her tired eyes watched the blade glisten in the pale moonlight, Nadia thought of one thing only—
"I don't want to be here."

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Leaves Have All Fallen Off

YASIF AHMAD FAYSAL

Leaves have all fallen off.
The tree stands there
Bare and nude,
Past her days of fecundity
Past her power to survive a sun
Pitiless and crude.
She is no more inviting to birds
Nor is she comforting with her scanty shade,
To travelers' burning thirst.
Knobbly and shriveled up all over,
She ekes out an existence
Without a relevant cause.
Alas! She remembers....
She remembers that many leaves ago
Wind from wild south
Made her dance
From root to the tenderest bough;
She remembers those rainbow days
When sensuous drops came whispering
On her tiny buds and sleepy foliage;
She remembers that life's full tide
Once swelled her blossoms
And made her darling to every living eye.
Now it is night.
Unpunctuated silence.
Quiet incommunicable pain.
The smell of earth is more than ever
Intense.

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REVIEWS

Of Identity, Love, and Holy War: A Review of *The Runaways*

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REVIEWED BY SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI

Rightfully so, *The Guardian* calls it a timely novel. In *The Runaways*, the discourse on radicalization is fanned by the converging lives of three different young people as we, the readers, are flown from dusty, noise-filled, engine-breathing Karachi, gloomy Portsmouth, and rustic Varanasi to rubble-filled, war-stricken Syria and Mosul.

If one thinks the novel is hell-bent on presenting "Islamic" radicalisation as radicalisation has grown to be a word strongly connected to Islam, then that would be a misconception (Anita Rose's story is a glaring example). In an interview with *The Wire*, she explains this with bold clarity and a robust tone, "I wouldn't call it 'Islamic' radicalism at all. Look at the world today—radicalism isn't the exclusive property of one people or one religion. Young people are vulnerable to anger and violence all over the world." She says radicalisation is spurred more by nationalism than religion.

In the novel's heart are Sunny, Monty, and Anita Rose.

Sunny, an avid listener of Frank Ocean's "fluid poetry," is born to a Portsmouth Immigrant originally from Varanasi, Sulaiman Jamil, and his cousin, Safiya Begum. Orphaned by his mother at a young age, his father becomes his sole guardian. In Portsmouth, while Sulaiman Jamil tries his best to integrate into the lifestyle of the residents by reading self-help writings like "How to Dress Like a Quintessential English Gentleman: The A to Z of Savile Row," Sunny digresses from his father's West-obsessed personality. Inspired by the words of Imran Khan, he writes "Why do we always ape the West?" on his Facebook wall.

As time hurtles, we notice vital changes in the nineteen-year-old Sunny. Sunny who would hook up with girls, fool around, and party hard, Sunny who would be chased by Desi girls, starts spending more time online, in the depths of the internet, his heart gutted by the hatred towards the West. On twitter, he criticizes the West, and puts up acrid posts which "land soundlessly." No one pays any heed to his insights.

Sunny is soon cupped in the palms of an unnerving identity crisis. Among other people, he stumbles across Stefan, who takes him to a gay club (which leads to an acquaintance spotting Sunny there, a "humiliating" episode for him), Ben, whose father is a Pakistani and mother an English, whose family acts "more royal than the Queen," a soft, generous local Imam from Bangladesh, whose words fail to work their charm on him, and Oz, his cousin, a Syria returnee, vehemently negative of the West and a staunch supporter of the "Shariah" law, who says, "The elites are eating up the world." Although the people he meets prior to Oz keep disappointing him, sowing in him the seeds of ignorance, arrogance, blindness, and exasperation, Oz's emergence acts like a balm to his pain. Sunny follows him as though he's the light of his life. He is blinded by the energy Oz oozes. He sees him everywhere, he gulps Oz's words like elixir. Oz's aura bleeds into Sunny's life, and he finally finds a purpose to dedicate himself to. Consequences and twists follow soon on.

Monty, "delivered by Karachi's most respected Parsi obstetrician," is the son of a quintessential rich Pakistani family. Based in Karachi, they reside in their Clifton home. They have a house in London and a Filipino servant—an English speaker—whose English speaking skills come handy to their "elite" lifestyle. Monty's mother is soft, his father obsessed with masculinity. While his mother trots towards superstition and grows overly religious, listens to the sermons delivered by a popular saint, his father isn't involved as much with religion as her. He drinks, she finds it unbearable. Her sudden exposure to faith makes her rid their home of things that are considered anti-Islam.

Monty studies at a posh American school of Karachi, where he meets Layla, the mysterious girl of everyone's dreams. Layla, who's highly critical of the popular, over-glorified beliefs. Layla, who's staunchly against the choosing of "selective chapters of history." Layla, whose enigmatic presence batters Monty's sens-

es, blinds him, and makes him besotted with every inch of her presence, driving him to precarious terrains, birthing vital twists and turbulence in the storyline.

Anita Rose lives in a busy Machar Colony that is always slapped by the sounds of regular struggles of the poor. Her mother Zenobia, obsessed with herbal medicine, believes in "mining the earth for medicine" and has "a cure for everything." Her elder brother Ezra struggles to earn a proper livelihood. His quests plunge him into a shady business



that brings a comfortable life to their doorsteps. That new life rebirths them, invites both evil and virtuous things, heals them, breaks them. It's almost as though comfort came with a revolutionary price.

The glimpse of Anita's life serves as a window into the lives of those who suffer in cramped colonies filled with grimy air, far away from the gated mansions of the rich.

From the hustle and bustle of her poverty-stricken life, Anita finds relief

in the company of Osama, their go-to neighbour for borrowing things. A well-read mysterious man with greying hair, who sips sharab and reads leftist literature, his teachings and advice inspire her. He calls her 'Lion.' It's because of him that she bleeds into the concept of criticizing Capitalism. After all, capitalism—the exclusion, the divide it causes—is the reason for their poverty.

In the words of Osama, she is "everything and nothing," for she moves "invisibly through the world."

In the novel, the lives of the poor intersect with those of the rich, and a painful longing stems from the intersection (from the poor's ends). A longing for the comfort. A longing for the fortune. Bhutto accomplishes the quality of painting contrasting pictures that mingle together and penetrate one another, by sprouting characters like Anita (and her family members), Khadija, Tano, etc.

The diverse chapters accounted by each character pop up frequently throughout the book instead of a dull development of one particular character's story. They make zero space for monotony in the readers' eyes. Finishing each chapter doesn't feel like a drag as the details, the development, the focus, everything here is perfectly balanced. Plus, Fatima Bhutto's prose is lyrical, which, throughout the book, flows like water. As a reader, I felt very much comfortable drifting through the progression, eyeing the characters' lives, hovering above them like a shadow, turning and marking page after page. The smoothly running flavour she uses blooms the characters and their lives right in front of us with utmost ease, and everything plays out as dictated by the words as though a rhythmic holographic film.

As the concept of radicalisation is the cynosure of all eyes here, Bhutto fervently emphasizes on the forces that make the young people vulnerable to the talons of radicalisation. Forces like poverty, loneliness, identity crisis, unwholesome companions, the internet, love, faith, blindness, mistreatment, injustice, etc. Probably, the best feature of *The*

Runaways is its ability to present before us a lucid world of radicalisation—the beginning, the aftermath, the twists, the turns. We are taken on a journey into Nineveh through the desert while the scorching sun emits fiery rays, the night winds soothe the bones, the wolves call in the distance alongside the staccato of gunfire, and the vultures and kites circle in the sky. We get to see how prisoners are murdered and video-taped from besieged towns. "No man cries or begs, they just stand there, biting onto each other's shirts with their teeth, like animals." We get to see how the Internet comforts the terrorists walking across undisturbed deserts and the mob of stalwart virtual followers they have.

This novel provides a glimpse of the fact that radicalisation is alive because of external factors. They act as its oxygen. Its lungs are pumped by those factors. An undertone of urgency always flutters above the storyline. An urgency to protect young people from the pangs of running away into a risky world. An urgency that would act like a little nudge to take preventive measures.

"When people have dignified work, a home, a feeling—that of security that comes from knowing they are a vital part of the fabric of their country and community—they don't run away to die. They don't pick up arms if they are assured an honourable life in their home countries."

These very words of Bhutto from an interview echo the urgency.

Boasting an adroitly crafted storyline and a dynamic vision which shows us the workings of an unhealthy ecosystem, *The Runaways* is a novel that helps one perceive the way certain forces can drive one to take up arms, leaving everything behind, in pursuit of identity, in pursuit of love, in quenching of hateful thirst through the window of literature. It's a novel whose characters perennially linger in one's mind.

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