



Fall 2019

FYS 101 Women Writing the World

Fall 2019

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Recommended Citation

Reckard, Addison, "Is Burning Escaping?" (2019). *Fall 2019*. 1.
https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/fys_ww_f2019/1

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Addison Reckard

Is Burning Escaping?

Rupi Kaur, a famous Indian-born Canadian poet wrote, “the way you speak of yourself, the way you degrade yourself, into smallness, is abuse” in her self-harm section of her bestseller *Milk and Honey*. Kaur’s work sparked an interest among young female audiences about the stigma of mental illnesses and heavy topics. Self-harm has become more normalized since the advancements in technology and the modernization of society particularly among young adult females. A study conducted by the Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey showed that one in five young women have self-harmed (Campbell). Katherine Boo’s *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* is a journalistic piece of work which describes what life is like in the slums of Mumbai, India.

Fatima was born with a birth defect causing her to only have one leg; her family felt ashamed of her, motivating them to hide her existence because of her imperfections (Boo). Later in life, when Fatima is exposed to her society, the judgement and abuse she experiences causes emotional trauma, taking a toll on Fatima, and ultimately causing her to set herself on fire (Boo). Boo uses Fatima’s emotional trauma from her past and the constant ridicule from others in her present to discuss the reasons Fatima ultimately turns to such a severe form of self-harm.

The way Fatima’s family emotionally abuses her plants the seed of self-doubt and insecurity, causing her to self-harm. Early in Fatima’s life, she was constantly compared to her sister because her sister did not have a physical disability (Boo). The feeling of self-doubt was sparked within Fatima at such a young age because she was constantly reminded that she was not perfect or normal. Boo writes, “‘I had such a hate for myself back then,’ Fatima told Zehrunisa,

whom she alternately relied on and resented. ‘All I heard was that I had been born wrong’” (Boo 72). Fatima was constantly reminded that she was not “normal”, and her parents were ashamed of her. Boo describes how Fatima was hid in her hut by her parents, writing, “but even the poorest of them helped her grasp what her parents had taken from her—those ashamed and shaming parents who’d hidden an imperfect daughter in their hut” (Boo 72). To Fatima, this demonstrates that her parents did not believe that she was good enough to be shown in society, forcing her to take on the same belief.

The way that her parents treated Fatima ultimately caused her to believe what her parents did. This feeling of being “less than” ultimately caused Fatima to self-harm as she is forced to wonder if she did not matter to her parents why should she matter at all? Research shows that “one of the lasting long-term effects of abuse is, for some people, that the voice or perspective of the abuser gets implanted into the minds of the victims in such a way that the victim starts to judge him or herself in the same way” (“Reasons”). The way Fatima’s parents constantly reminded her that she was not normal causes her to feel shame for who she is at a young age. Because Fatima was not introduced to society at a younger age, it made it more difficult for her to enter society when she was older because she was already insecure about who she was.

Society in the slums emotionally abused Fatima in the same fashion that her parents did, reinforcing a negative self-image. Because Fatima is forced into society without ever experiencing love and affection at a young age, society does not know how respond to her entering society, reinforcing her already negative self-image from her parents. The fact that society refers to Fatima as “One-leg” throughout the entire text shows how little respect society

has for her as a human (Boo). Being referred to as “One-leg” by society is a constant reminder that she is not normal and that she does not deserve to be noticed.

Society not only mocks her disability, but also judges her role as a mother. Boo writes, “but especially when Zehrunisa considered Fatima’s children, her own respect drained away” (Boo 75). This shows that although Zehrunisa tried not to judge Fatima, she could not resist. The people in the slums make Fatima feel like she should not be a mother because she is not capable with one leg. Fatima already feels ashamed of herself because of the emotional abuse she experiences from her parents and adding on the abuse from society, leads Fatima to self-harm because she wanted to feel something, anything at all. Because Fatima constantly felt less than human, she began to feel nothing at all, however it has been studied that “what people may not realize is that it is also painful to feel nothing” (“Reasons”). Fatima felt like she was nothing so she self-harmed to try to feel something even if that feeling was pain. Her burning herself created a strong sensation, allowing her to feel more than she ever had before, even in a negative way.

Some people may see her self-harm not as a way of wanting freedom but as an “easy way out” from having to deal with her reality. People could argue that she is a coward for deciding to self-harm instead of facing her problems head on. No one in the town respected her or even acknowledged her existence, so she would not be able to communicate with people about how she feels without feeling ashamed or being shut down. Not only would she feel ashamed about having one-leg, but she also is illiterate and would be judged because of it (Boo). Fatima would have no confidence nor the ability to talk to anyone about how she feels because no one cared

about her. No one took time to refer to her by her real name or to check up on her. She was constantly fighting with her neighbors and with the demons in her mind telling her that she did not matter and that she did not deserve to live. Fatima used self-harm as a way to communicate with people that she mattered and that she deserves to be treated as a human too despite her physical disabilities.

Fatima set herself on fire to escape her reality and forget who she was. Her reality is enforced through peoples treatment of her, especially that way people address her as “One-leg,” which constantly reminds her that she is not whole (Boo). Fatima wanted to forget that she was not whole and that she was not normal because for once she wanted to feel like she mattered. She felt numb because of the way that people disregarded her existence her entire life and when they did address her, they lacked respect for her as a human. The way her family and society view her as a failure, not only because of her physical disability but also her lack of motherly attributes, creates the feeling of being a failure within her and she wants to escape that reality as well. Fatima murdered her daughter and that feeling of guilt and being a failure is constantly haunting her in the back of her mind (Boo). The way Fatima chose to escape her guilt, reminders of abuse she faced, belief that she was a failure and incredibly negative self-image, was through setting herself on fire. This is a form of escape because for the first time she is able to forget the way her family and society see her as a failure and uses her own actions and decisions to make herself *feel*. Not only did Fatima use setting herself on fire to *feel* but she also used it as a way to further communicate with society and her family that she was hurting.

Fatima uses her inflicting self-harm as a way to communicate with society and her parents that she was suffering. Many used self-harm because, “what they experience inside their minds is overwhelming to them that words can’t do justice” (“Reasons”). Fatima felt the need to set herself on fire to communicate the magnitude of her feelings. While this may be an extreme version of self-harm it is what was needed to reach her oblivious society. She needed to do something that would impact the community, make people notice, because if it was small, that would have just been another reason for society to ridicule her more. Fatima succeeded with her motivation of why she set herself on fire. A notable reason people self-harm is as a means of communication, “People who self-injure as a means of communication may be doing it to draw attention to themselves” (“Reasons”). Fatima wanted people to notice her and she succeeded in that when she set herself on fire. She wanted to express that she mattered even though she was different, and she sparked an inspiration for younger girls within the slum to fight oppression the way that Fatima did. Boo writes, “‘Maybe it’s better just to do what Fatima did,’ Meena said, ‘Escape the situation if you know you are going to be miserable’” (184). Fatima not only raised attention to make people more aware of the effects that society has on people, but she was also admired for her bravery and astonishing act.

Boo displays the impacts of a person’s past and present experiences affecting someone negatively through Fatima’s emotional trauma. The reasons why Fatima self-harmed are significant because they signify the struggles she experienced inflicted upon her by outside forces. There are millions of people in the world who are constantly battling with the voices inside their minds telling them they do not matter and that they are not worthy, and Boo uses

Fatima to appeal to a more emotional side of readers. People are constantly struggling with emotional and physical abuse daily and Boo uses Fatima as a means of connection and likeness with the audience. Understanding why Fatima self-harmed matters because there are people across the entire world struggling with the same battles and understanding the reasons for why, could help save lives. Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* instills the feeling of awareness when judging or saying unkind words about or to another human being because everyone is human, and everyone deserves to be treated like one.

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