

# The Fragmented Self: Exploring Identity in Meena Kandasamy's Exquisite Cadavers

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**Abstract-** Meena Kandasamy's experimental novel *Exquisite Cadavers* offers a compelling exploration of fragmented identity in a fractured world. This article argues that the protagonist, Maya, experiences a profound sense of fragmentation due to the intersecting pressures of her mixed-race heritage, the turbulent political climate, and her own personal struggles. By analyzing Maya's interactions and her husband Karim's internal reflections that mirror the novel's fragmented structure, the article demonstrates how trauma, cultural displacement, and societal expectations contribute to Maya's fractured sense of self. Ultimately, the analysis reveals how *Exquisite Cadavers* challenges conventional notions of identity and how Maya's fragmented identity helps us understand the complexities faced by mixed-race individuals in navigating their inner world and societal pressures. The trauma Maya experienced in childhood impacts her adult self, leading to both resistance and conformity to patriarchal structures. This disruption of narrative coherence results in feelings of fragmentation and disconnection. The novel's fragmented structure also reflects the instability and uncertainty of contemporary society, where political polarization, social inequalities, and technological change make it difficult for individuals to develop a coherent and stable sense of self. As a result, Maya's fragmented self represents a broader search for belonging in a fractured world, with significance as a site of resistance, creativity, and self-discovery.

**Key words:** Fragmentation, trauma, disconnection, societal pressures

## INTRODUCTION

Meena Kandasamy, an acclaimed Indian novelist and poet, is renowned for her bold and unique writing style that reflects a radical feminist perspective and engagement with political movements. In her latest novel, "Exquisite Cadavers," Kandasamy employs an experimental Oulipian approach, incorporating

various techniques reminiscent of the Oulipo spirit, rather than adhering to a single constraint. This experimental method serves to disrupt the traditional narrative structure, mirroring the fragmented experiences of the characters within the novel.

The non-linear structure of the novel, with its abrupt shifts in time and perspective, directly mirrors Maya's fragmented mental state. The reader, much like Maya, experiences the narrative in a fragmented manner, reflecting the difficulty Maya faces in crafting a coherent narrative of her own identity. This disjointedness creates a sense of unease and further emphasizes the fragmented nature of Maya's sense of self.

Kandasamy's exploration of Maya's personal anxieties, such as her struggles with motherhood, her relationship with her father, and her marital challenges, contributes to the portrayal of a fragmented identity.

## IDENTITY OF MAYA: TRAUMA'S ECHO

Maya is a young mixed-race woman living in London with her husband Karim. She is both the protagonist and narrator of the novel, whose identity is fractured due to various intersecting pressures, including her mixed-race heritage, the turbulent political climate, and personal anxieties. She struggles with feelings of displacement, alienation, and uncertainty. Being a writer and thinker, she constantly analyzes her own experiences and the world around her and is deeply aware of the complexities of her identity and the challenges she faces. Despite her struggles, Maya demonstrates resilience and a capacity for resistance. She seeks to find her voice in a world that often seeks to silence her. The trauma she faced includes her past

abuse and racism along with unresolved childhood trauma that she received as a child from her father. Her relationship with her father is both a connection and a conflict. As a child, she always wished for his love, but she would get nothing, and his decision to remarry made her expose the potent mix of betrayal and resentment. His impending marriage acts as a catalyst, releasing her suppressed emotions. "Two decades of bottled-up hate finds an outlet. Kandasamy (*Exquisite Cadavers* 19), indicates a long-standing resentment towards her father. This anger likely stems from her childhood experiences of abandonment and her perception of his role in her mother's departure.

Maya being very close to her father since childhood though she received very less parental love from him made her describe paternal obsession as untranslatable disease and views her father's behaviour as pathological. She sees his focus on his new relationship as a form of obsession, further fueling her resentment and sense of abandonment. This idea of obsession is perceived by her as "contagious state-of-mind" and that will negatively impact her own life and relationships. "Paternal obsession is an unnamed, untranslatable disease marked only by how it leaves behind a contiguous state-of-mind. "Kandasamy (*Exquisite Cadavers* 20). This impact of past trauma relating to her father on Maya's present sense of self is a recurring theme, becoming a strong reason for her fragmented self.

#### THE SCARS OF RACISM: IMPACT ON IDENTITY

Kandasamy powerfully illustrates the theme of racism through the experience of Maya, a mixed-race woman whose life is significantly altered when she enters a relationship with an Arab man. Before her relationship, Maya's mixed-race heritage allowed her to "pass for white," granting her certain privileges and shielding her from questions about her origins. The introduction of an Arab partner disrupts this, suddenly making her racial identity a subject of scrutiny and prejudice. This demonstrates how racial categorization is not fixed but can be fluid and context-dependent. Meena kandasamy uses the phrase "lets loose everyone's inner Orientalist" which directly refers to the concept of orientalism which describes the West's exoticizing and often prejudiced representations of the

East. Since Maya's relationship has made her a representative of her partner's race and culture. She anticipates the prejudiced questions and comments, recognizing that engaging with them would be emotionally draining and makes her a representative of her partner's race and culture. She anticipates the prejudiced questions and comments, recognizing that engaging with them would be emotionally draining.

Maya's response to racist jokes reveal a deeply ingrained power imbalance in society and her attempts to navigate it. Racist jokes are not isolated incidents but part of a larger pattern of prejudice and microaggressions. The fact that Maya and Karim pretend to ignore them implies a deliberate attempt to downplay their significance and maintain a semblance of normalcy. The jokes are directed at his own ethnic or racial group, ostensibly "at his expense." This performative self-deprecation can be a way of deflecting criticism or appearing tolerant, while simultaneously perpetuating harmful stereotypes. By laughing along with the jokes, Maya may inadvertently internalize some of the racist sentiments they express. This can lead to feelings of self-doubt, shame, and a distorted sense of her own identity. Kandasamy powerfully illustrates the theme of racism through the experience of Maya, a mixed-race woman and her experience exposes the pervasive and insidious nature of racism, highlighting how it operates through stereotypes, microaggressions, and the constant questioning of belonging that further lead to fragmented identity. "This fragmentation of identity leads to a lot of problems at the level of individual, society, the world and the entire species of existence at large because as everything is connected deeply".(R1)

#### REPETITION AND FRAGMENTATION

In Meena Kandasamy's *Exquisite Cadavers*, Maya's fragmented psyche is deeply intertwined with a compulsion to repeat which is called repetition compulsion where trauma is relieved. Repetition manifests in Maya's thoughts, behaviors, and the very structure of the narrative, reflecting her attempts to grapple with the complexities of her identity and the turbulent world around her. Maya frequently revisits past traumas and anxieties, particularly those related to her childhood and her mixed-race heritage. These

cyclical thoughts, while not exact repetitions of events, trap her in a loop of unresolved emotions, preventing her from moving forward and forming a cohesive sense of self.

The constant return to these themes underscores the fragmented nature of her memory and the difficulty she faces in integrating her past experiences into her present identity. While not as prominent as the ruminations, certain behavioral patterns, like seeking validation from others or withdrawing into isolation, can be seen as manifestations of repetition compulsion. These behaviors, though seemingly different, stem from the same underlying anxieties and contribute to a sense of stagnation in Maya's personal growth. Along with this, the novel's fragmented structure, with its abrupt shifts in time and perspective, mirrors Maya's fragmented internal state. This formal choice reinforces the sense of disruption and discontinuity that characterizes her experience. The recurring motifs and themes throughout the narrative further emphasize the cyclical nature of Maya's thoughts and the challenges she faces in creating a coherent narrative of her own life. Therefore, repetitive compulsion is a complex response to trauma, societal pressures, and the fragmented nature of contemporary life.

#### CONCLUSION

Identity in the contemporary world is often disintegrated due to various traumas and pressures that individuals undergo from society. This study has explored identity fragmentation in character Maya from *Exquisite Cadavers* whose psyche is influenced by mixed heritage, personal struggles and trauma. Being mixed-race makes her feel like she doesn't fully belong to any one group. Her anxieties about motherhood, her relationship with her father, and her marriage add to her inner conflict and her past trauma disrupts her sense of self and makes it hard for her to feel whole. This article in conclusion, examines Maya's fragmented self is not a weakness but a reflection of the complex world she inhabits. Her struggle to find wholeness amidst the fragments represents a broader search for belonging in a fractured world. Ultimately, *Exquisite Cadavers* challenges us to rethink traditional notions of identity

and embrace the complexities of selfhood in the face of trauma, societal pressures, and political turmoil."

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