DOI: https://doi.org/10.63056/jllsa.2.11.2026.430

Journal of Language, Literature & Social Affairs

journal homepage: https://scholarclub.org/index.php/jllsa

Identity Crisis and Cultural Conflict: A Postcolonial Study of Tariq Mehmood's "*You're Not Proper*" (2015)

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ARTICLE INFO

Received:
September 15, 2026
Revision Received:
October 08, 2026
Accepted:
October 19, 2026
Available Online:
November 02, 2026

Keywords:
Ambivalence, Cultural Conflict, Hybridity, Identity Crisis, Marginality, Mimicry

ABSTRACT

Colonialism leaves profound and multidimensional effects on colonized societies and individuals, particularly in relation to cultural belonging and identity formation. This study examines the interrelationship between hybridity, identity crisis, and cultural conflict in Tariq Mehmood's novel *You're Not Proper* (2015). The novel centres on female character Kiran, whose identity is shaped by her Christian mother and Muslim father. Negotiating the religious and cultural expectations associated with these backgrounds, Kiran experiences uncertainty about her sense of self and belonging. Her predicament reflects broader tensions surrounding religious identity, cultural differences, and the negotiation of belonging within a postcolonial context. Employing qualitative textual analysis, the study investigates Kiran's experiences, relationships, and struggles with identity formation through Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence. The analysis explores how her hybrid background complicates her identification with either religious community and exposes her to marginalization and conflicting expectations. It further examines the role of family, religion, and cultural norms in shaping her identity crisis and considers how ambivalence characterizes her negotiation of competing identities. The findings suggest that Mehmood presents identity as complex, fluid, and continually negotiated rather than fixed or predetermined. By foregrounding Kiran's experiences, the study contributes to an understanding of identity formation and cultural conflict in postcolonial literature. It also provides a basis for further research into the intersections of language, culture, identity, trauma, and memory in postcolonial literary texts.

1. Introduction

Postcolonial literature has played a significant role in challenging colonial representations and foregrounding indigenous cultural identities, aesthetics, and folklore. According to Ray (2007), writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, R. K. Narayan, Khushwant Singh, and Zulfiqar Ghose responded to colonial narratives through their literary works as postcolonial writing gained prominence across formerly colonized societies. Nayar (2015) highlights the role of globalization

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and migration, particularly to Western countries, in intensifying cross-cultural encounters during the latter half of the twentieth century. These developments contributed to the formation of diasporic communities in Europe and North America and generated new debates concerning cultural belonging, political affiliation, and identity formation. Consequently, a growing number of writers and critics began examining the complexities of cross-cultural communication and its implications for individual and collective identities. Authors such as Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, Ben Okri, Mohsin Hamid, and Kamila Shamsie have explored questions of cultural hybridity, displacement, and belonging in their literary works.

Tariq Mehmood, a Pakistani-born British writer, addresses questions of cultural identity and belonging in his literary work. Born in Pakistan in 1956 and raised in Bradford, England, Mehmood draws on experiences associated with migration, cultural difference, and life in British society. He began writing his first novel, *Hand on the Sun* (1983), while imprisoned, reportedly believing that he might spend much of his life in prison. His later novel, *You're Not Proper* (2015), published by Hope Road in London, explores questions of identity and cultural belonging within a British social context marked by tensions surrounding religious and cultural difference. The novel received recognition through the Francis Lincoln Diverse Voices Award before its publication. Its engagement with cultural boundaries and the negotiation of identity makes it a relevant text for examining postcolonial concerns, particularly hybridity, ambivalence, and the challenges individuals encounter when navigating competing cultural and religious expectations.

The present study aims to analyze Tariq Mehmood's novel *You're Not Proper* with a particular focus on the issue of identity crisis. It is essential to investigate how Kiran's identity crisis is portrayed in the novel. Accordingly, one of the objectives of the present study is to explore the influence of social, cultural, and religious factors on Kiran's identity transformation from Karen to Kiran. Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theory, the study examines the concepts of hybridity, ambivalence, and mimicry as reflected in the novel.

1.1. Research Questions

- How is Kiran's identity crisis portrayed in Tariq Mehmood's novel *You're Not Proper*?
- How do religious, cultural, and social factors influence Kiran's transformation from Karen to Kiran?
- How are Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity, ambivalence, and mimicry manifested in Tariq Mehmood's novel *You're Not Proper*?

2. Literature Review

Postcolonial theory has become an influential framework for examining the relationships among colonial histories, cultural identities, and the negotiation of belonging. Existing scholarship has explored how individuals experience identity crises when negotiating between their indigenous cultural backgrounds and the cultural practices of dominant societies. Within this field, Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence have been particularly significant in understanding the complexities of postcolonial identity. These concepts provide a theoretical basis for investigating how individuals negotiate cultural differences, respond to competing social expectations, and develop a sense of belonging in contexts shaped by migration and colonial legacies.

Hamza (2022) examines the concept of mimicry and its relationship with identity crisis in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* and *Under Copenhagen Sky*, as identified in the cited study. Drawing on Bhabha's (1994) postcolonial framework, the study explores how characters negotiate their identities through encounters with Western cultural practices. The analysis highlights the relationship between cultural imitation, hybridity, and the difficulties individuals experience in establishing a stable sense of self. This research is relevant to the present study because it demonstrates how the adoption of dominant cultural practices may complicate identity formation. However, the particular ways in which religious backgrounds and conflicting family expectations shape identity negotiation require further examination in the context of Mehmood's *You're Not Proper*.

Identity crisis is closely associated with uncertainty concerning one's sense of self, cultural belonging, and social position. It may become particularly pronounced when individuals encounter conflicting cultural expectations or experience a sense of displacement between different communities. In postcolonial contexts, such uncertainty can be understood in relation to hybridity and ambivalence. Bhabha (1994) challenges the assumption that cultural identities are fixed, pure, or entirely independent of one another. Instead, his account of cultural interaction emphasizes the emergence of identities through negotiation and the encounter between cultural positions. Mimicry, in this framework, refers to the partial imitation of the dominant culture by the colonized subject, producing a resemblance that remains incomplete. As Mambrol (2016) explains in his discussion of Bhabha's work, colonial relations involve interdependence and the mutual construction of colonizer and colonized subjectivities. These theoretical perspectives are useful for understanding identity as a dynamic process shaped by cultural encounters, power relations, and competing expectations rather than as a predetermined or unchanging condition.

Sundus, Rabbani, and Habib (2021) investigate cultural hybridity and identity crisis in *Our Lady Paris* and *Lily*, as identified in their study. Their research focuses on Pakistani youth and their attempts to negotiate the relationship between Western cultural influences and indigenous traditions. According to the researchers, individuals, particularly those belonging to upper socioeconomic groups, may develop a form of dual consciousness through their exposure to Western cultural practices. Such individuals may appreciate or adopt elements of Western culture while continuing to maintain connections with their indigenous cultural backgrounds. The study illustrates how cultural identity can involve the simultaneous negotiation of different cultural orientations. Its relevance to the present research lies in its recognition that cultural hybridity does not necessarily entail the complete abandonment of one's original cultural affiliations. Rather, individuals may experience a complex relationship between competing cultural influences, a tension that is also pertinent to examining Kiran's identity formation in *You're Not Proper*.

Zubair and Ahmed (2018) examine cultural ambivalence and bicultural identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*. Situated within the context of immigration and diasporic experience, their study considers the challenges individuals encounter when negotiating cultural belonging and responding to the possibility of identity loss. Drawing on Bhabha's theoretical perspectives and approaches to culture and diaspora, the researchers explore the tensions associated with living between cultural environments. Their discussion highlights the alienation, uncertainty, and difficulties that may arise when individuals attempt to reconcile inherited cultural values with the expectations of a different social setting. The study contributes to an understanding of bicultural identity as a process involving negotiation rather than a straightforward transition from one cultural affiliation to another. This perspective provides a useful point of comparison for analyzing how Kiran navigates competing cultural and religious expectations in Mehmood's novel.

Şimşek (2021) investigates identity crisis and language in Gurnah's *By the Sea* and the second novel identified in the cited study as *Lane* by Monica. The research explores the experiences of immigrant characters who encounter unfamiliar cultural environments and struggle to establish a sense of belonging in Europe. Their experiences of alienation and ambivalence are examined in relation to identity construction and the challenges of learning and using English in a new social context. The study suggests that migration involves more than geographical relocation; it can also transform individuals' relationships with language, culture, and their sense of self. The characters' struggles reveal the influence of both internal conflicts and external social pressures on identity formation. This research is relevant to the present study because it foregrounds the relationship between displacement and the development of identity. Nevertheless, the particular intersection of religious difference, family expectations, and cultural belonging in Mehmood's novel warrants focused investigation.

Tamrin and Kalimbongan (2023) examine postcolonial identity in Meredith Duran's *The Duke of Shadows* through Bhabha's concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence. Their analysis focuses on Julian Sinclair, a character of mixed British and Indian heritage whose identity is shaped by his engagement with both cultural traditions. The study interprets his hybrid identity through the notion of the Third Space, in which cultural affiliations intersect and produce a complex sense of belonging. Mimicry emerges through his engagement with English behaviour and Indian customs, while ambivalence becomes apparent in his conflicting responses to England and India during the Indian Rebellion. The study illustrates how individuals with multiple cultural affiliations may experience tensions between inherited loyalties and personal sympathies. Its analytical value for the present research lies in demonstrating how hybridity and ambivalence can be examined through a character's relationships, choices, and responses to conflicting cultural demands.

Humaira (2010) analyses Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* from the perspective of identity crisis. The study argues that migration may complicate an individual's sense of belonging when the cultural identity associated with the country of origin becomes difficult to reconcile with the expectations of the host society. Consequently, individuals may experience a sense of displacement in both environments, finding it difficult to establish an unquestioned sense of belonging in either. The research also considers the ways in which Muslim identity is associated with religious affiliation and Pakistani national identity. This discussion is pertinent to the present study because it draws attention to the multiple dimensions through which identity may be constructed and contested. In particular, it suggests the importance of examining how religious, national, and cultural affiliations interact when individuals negotiate their positions within different social environments.

Ahmed (2024) further explores the relationship between identity, resistance, and hybridity in Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Focusing on Changez, the protagonist, the study examines the tensions arising from his American education and professional experiences alongside his Pakistani cultural background. These intersecting influences create a complex relationship between his sense of self and the expectations associated with different cultural environments. The analysis highlights the difficulties of maintaining a coherent identity amid competing cultural pressures and considers the implications of these tensions for understanding postcolonial subjectivity in a globalized world. By examining the relationship between cultural hybridity and resistance, the study challenges simplistic distinctions between Eastern and Western identities. It therefore provides a relevant comparative perspective for analyzing identity negotiation in You're Not Proper, although the specific role of religious difference and familial relationships in Kiran's experience requires separate consideration.

Aurangzeb and Saeed (2025) investigate postcolonial hybridity and ambivalence in the novels of Kamila Shamsie, including *In the City by the Sea* (1998), *Salt and Saffron* (2000), *Kartography (*2001), *Broken Verses* (2005), *Burnt Shadows* (2009), *A God in Every Stone* (2014), *Home Fire* (2017), and *Best of Friends* (2022). Their study considers the effects of migration, cultural interaction, and globalization on Pakistani society as represented in Shamsie's fiction. The researchers examine how cultural plurality challenges the notion that identity is pure, uniform, or unchanged over time. Their discussion highlights the significance of hybridity and ambivalence in understanding the multiple cultural affiliations that shape individuals and communities. This scholarship reinforces the argument that identity formation is a continuing process influenced by historical circumstances, cultural encounters, and social relationships. It also provides a broader postcolonial context for examining the complex cultural affiliations represented in Mehmood's novel.

Postcolonial approaches have also been applied to Pakistani cinema to investigate the continuing influence of colonial histories on cultural identity. Nisa Yar Muhammad et al. (2025) examine the Pakistani film Khuda Kay Liye through Bhabha's concept of hybridity. Their analysis considers how the film represents the interaction between Western cultural influences and indigenous traditions in Pakistani society. Mansoor's attraction to a liberal Western lifestyle, alongside his continuing relationship with his cultural background, illustrates the negotiation of competing cultural orientations. Sarmad's experiences are interpreted through the tension between musical expression, spirituality, and liberal perspectives, while Mary's experiences are examined in relation to British cultural influences and the development of extremist attitudes in Pakistan. The study presents these characters as illustrating different manifestations of cultural hybridity and ambivalence. Its contribution lies in extending postcolonial analysis beyond literary texts and demonstrating the relevance of Bhabha's concepts to representations of identity in Pakistani cultural production. It also underscores the need to examine how individuals negotiate conflicting ideological and cultural positions.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate the continuing relevance of postcolonial theory to the investigation of hybridity, mimicry, ambivalence, and identity crisis across literary and cultural contexts. Research on diasporic fiction, migration, bicultural identity, and Pakistani cultural production has established that identity is neither necessarily fixed nor formed independently of social relationships and cultural encounters. Instead, it emerges through negotiations involving inherited traditions, dominant cultural influences, religious affiliations, and the expectations of different communities. Nevertheless, the studies reviewed above address these concerns through different texts, characters, and social circumstances. The specific relationship between a mixed religious background, family expectations, cultural conflict, and the negotiation of female identity in Tariq Mehmood's *You're Not Proper* remains the central concern of the present research.

Accordingly, this study examines identity crisis and cultural conflict in Mehmood's *You're Not Proper* through Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial framework, with particular attention to hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence. It focuses on the protagonist's transformation from Karen to Kiran and investigates how her family background, religious affiliations, and social environment shape her understanding of herself and her position within different cultural communities. Through qualitative textual analysis, the study explores how these intersecting influences complicate her sense of belonging and contribute to her identity crisis. By focusing on the relationship between religious difference, cultural expectations, and female identity formation, the research seeks to contribute to existing discussions of postcolonial identity and to extend the application of Bhabha's theoretical concepts to the analysis of Mehmood's novel.

3. Research Methodology

McKee (2003) describes textual analysis as a qualitative research method concerned with examining how meaning is constructed within texts. Rather than relying primarily on numerical data, this approach involves the close reading and interpretation of textual elements, including characterization, narrative structure, dialogue, and language use, to explore how meanings are produced and communicated. Textual analysis also considers the social and cultural contexts in which a text is produced and interpreted, recognizing that meaning is shaped by the interaction between textual features and contextual influences. It is therefore an interpretive process through which researchers examine relevant textual evidence in relation to a particular research problem and an appropriate theoretical framework.

In the present study, qualitative textual analysis is employed to examine identity formation and cultural conflict in Tariq Mehmood's *You're Not Proper* (2015). The analysis focuses on selected passages and textual quotations that illuminate the protagonist Kiran's experiences, relationships, and negotiation of identity. Particular attention is given to the ways in which religious affiliations, family expectations, and cultural norms shape her sense of self and belonging. The selected textual evidence is interpreted through Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) postcolonial theoretical framework, with a focus on hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence. These concepts guide the examination of how Kiran negotiates competing cultural expectations, experiences tensions between different affiliations, and encounters challenges in establishing a stable sense of identity. Through this theoretically informed analysis, the study investigates how the novel represents identity as a complex and continually negotiated process within a postcolonial context.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theory, particularly the concepts discussed in *The Location of Culture* (1994), to examine identity crisis and cultural conflict in Tariq Mehmood's *You're Not Proper* (2015). Bhabha's theoretical framework challenges the notion that cultural identities are fixed, unified, or entirely independent of other cultural influences. Instead, it emphasizes the complex ways in which identities are negotiated through cultural encounters, social relationships, and unequal power relations. These ideas are particularly relevant to the experiences of diasporic communities, whose members may negotiate multiple cultural affiliations while confronting questions of belonging and social acceptance. The present study employs three key concepts—hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence—to investigate how Kiran negotiates her identity within the intersecting cultural and religious contexts represented in the novel.

4.1. Hybridity

Hybridity is a central concept in Bhabha's postcolonial theory. It challenges the assumption that cultures and identities are pure, stable, and clearly separated. Instead, cultural identities develop through interaction, negotiation, and encounters between different cultural positions (Bhabha, 1994). Hybridity, therefore, does not simply refer to the combination of two cultures; it also draws attention to the emergence of new meanings and identities within the spaces where cultural boundaries are negotiated. By questioning the idea of cultural purity, hybridity challenges essentialist understandings of identity and highlights the transformative potential of cultural interaction.

In *You're Not Proper*, hybridity provides a framework for examining how cultural and religious affiliations shape Kiran's sense of self. Her background connects her to different religious and cultural traditions, creating a complex relationship between identity, belonging, and social expectations. The concept will be applied to relevant textual passages that represent her negotiation of cultural values, language, behaviour, and social relationships. Rather than assuming that Kiran simply combines two distinct cultures, the analysis will examine how her experiences reveal the tensions and possibilities involved in constructing an identity across cultural boundaries.

4.2. Mimicry

Mimicry is another significant concept in Bhabha's postcolonial framework. It refers to the process through which colonized subjects imitate selected behaviours, values, linguistic practices, or cultural conventions associated with a dominant colonial culture. However, such imitation is never entirely complete or identical to the original. Bhabha (1994) explains mimicry as a contradictory process in which resemblance coexists with difference. Consequently, mimicry can reproduce dominant cultural norms while simultaneously exposing the instability of the distinctions on which colonial authority depends.

In the context of *You're Not Proper*, mimicry provides an analytical perspective for investigating whether and how Kiran adopts British linguistic practices, social manners, or cultural conventions in response to the expectations of her social environment. The analysis will consider the motivations behind such adaptations and examine whether they facilitate social acceptance or leave her vulnerable to exclusion. Particular attention will be given to textual evidence demonstrating how ethnic and religious differences may continue to shape social perceptions despite attempts to conform to dominant cultural expectations. Through this approach, mimicry will be examined not merely as imitation but as a potentially contradictory process involving adaptation, recognition, and exclusion.

4.3. Ambivalence

Ambivalence refers to the contradictory attitudes and identifications that characterize colonial and postcolonial cultural relations. In Bhabha's (1994) framework, the relationship between dominant and subordinate cultural positions is not based on straightforward opposition or complete acceptance. Rather, it involves simultaneous attraction and resistance, identification and differentiation. Ambivalence complicates the distinction between cultural authority and cultural difference because the relationship between these positions remains unstable and internally contradictory.

In *You're Not Proper*, ambivalence provides a framework for examining Kiran's conflicting responses to the cultural and religious expectations surrounding her. Her experiences may reveal tensions between the desire for social acceptance and the need to negotiate her own sense of identity and belonging. The analysis will investigate relevant passages in which her affiliations, relationships, or responses to others suggest uncertainty, contradiction, or divided loyalties. It will also consider how these tensions are shaped by the expectations of the communities with which she interacts. Ambivalence will thus help explain the complexity of Kiran's identity negotiation without assuming that her experiences necessarily lead to a complete rejection of either cultural affiliation.

The three concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence will guide the textual analysis of Kiran's identity formation in *You're Not Proper*. Each concept provides a distinct but complementary analytical perspective. Hybridity will be used to examine how

cultural and religious affiliations intersect in the construction of her identity. Mimicry will inform the analysis of her possible adoption of dominant cultural practices and the extent to which such adaptation affects her social acceptance. Ambivalence will help investigate the contradictions and tensions that emerge as she negotiates competing expectations and affiliations.

Together, these concepts will provide a framework for examining how Kiran's experiences are shaped by cultural interaction, social pressures, and questions of belonging. The analysis will draw on selected passages from the novel, focusing on relevant representations of language, behaviour, relationships, religious affiliations, and social responses. The application of Bhabha's theoretical framework will therefore enable the study to investigate identity not as a fixed or predetermined condition but as a complex process shaped by negotiation, contradiction, and cultural interaction.

5. Discussion and Findings

Tariq Mehmood's *You're Not Proper* (2015) explores the complexities of cultural identity, belonging, and exclusion within a society shaped by cultural and religious differences. The novel centres on Kiran, whose identity is influenced by her Muslim Pakistani father and Christian mother. Growing up between different cultural and religious affiliations, Kiran struggles to establish a stable sense of self and to find acceptance within either community. Her experiences illustrate the challenges of negotiating a hybrid identity in a social environment where cultural and religious boundaries influence how individuals are perceived and accepted. Through Kiran's character, Mehmood highlights the tensions that arise when multiple affiliations intersect with social expectations and questions of belonging.

Kiran's hybrid identity becomes apparent from the opening of the novel, particularly through the geographical division of the community in which she lives. She observes, "I live in Boarhead West. And on the other side, in Boarhead East, live the scarfs, turbans and beards" (Mehmood, 2015, p. 3). The contrast between Boarhead West and Boarhead East establishes a spatial division that reflects broader cultural boundaries within the community. The references to "scarfs, turbans and beards" foreground visible markers associated with cultural and religious identity, suggesting that belonging is partly constructed through outward signs of difference. Kiran's position within this divided social environment mirrors her own struggle to negotiate competing cultural affiliations. From the beginning, therefore, the novel establishes a connection between the organization of social space and the difficulties of forming an identity that does not conform neatly to established cultural categories. Read through Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity, this division illustrates how cultural boundaries shape identity while also revealing the limitations of treating communities as internally uniform and entirely separate.

The tension surrounding Kiran's identity becomes more explicit in Shamshad's remark: "You're white on the inside aren't you… But brown like me" (Mehmood, 2015, p. 5). This statement exposes the assumptions through which identity is judged according to perceived differences between internal values and external appearance. The contrast between being "white on the inside" and "brown" on the outside suggests that Kiran's cultural belonging is evaluated through competing expectations about how a person should think, behave, and appear. The label "Oreo" (Mehmood, 2015, p. 5) further reinforces this tension by implying a perceived contradiction between Kiran's outward racial identity and her presumed cultural orientation. Rather than recognizing the complexity of her background, such labels position her identity as a problem to be explained or classified. The resulting tension illustrates how hybrid identities may become sites of social judgement when individuals are expected to conform to fixed categories of belonging.

Kiran's internalization of this conflict becomes evident when she asks, "And who was I? Mixed race? Oreo? Christian? Muslim?" (Mehmood, 2015, p. 9). The sequence of questions reveals her uncertainty about the categories through which she is expected to define herself. The juxtaposition of racial, socially imposed, and religious labels suggests that her identity cannot be adequately explained through a single category. Her questioning also indicates that the difficulty lies not simply in having multiple affiliations but in navigating a social environment that treats these affiliations as potentially incompatible. Through Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity, Kiran's experience can be interpreted as a struggle over the meaning and boundaries of identity. Rather than presenting her background as a harmonious combination of different traditions, the novel foregrounds the tensions that emerge when cultural affiliations intersect with external judgements and expectations. Kiran's experience thus illustrates how the negotiation of hybrid identity may involve uncertainty, marginalization, and a continuing search for belonging.

A further manifestation of Kiran's hybrid identity appears in the variation between the names Karen and Kiran. Her father's question, "Karen or Kiran? Whoever you are today" (Mehmood, 2015, p. 36), draws attention to the shifting ways in which her identity is named and recognized. The alternative names reveal that different aspects of her background become prominent in different social or familial contexts. Her father's remark also introduces an element of uncertainty into the process of identification, as though her identity changes according to the name through which she is addressed. Rather than indicating a straightforward replacement of one identity with another, the coexistence of Karen and Kiran highlights the difficulty of reducing her sense of self to a single, stable designation. From a postcolonial perspective, this naming variation can be examined

in relation to the negotiation of cultural identity and the pressures to become recognizable within particular social frameworks. It also raises questions about who has the authority to name and define an individual. Through this representation, Mehmood presents Kiran's identity as continually negotiated within the competing expectations associated with her cultural and religious affiliations.

Kiran's decision to participate in her father's religion further illustrates the changing nature of her hybrid identity. When she decides to explore her Muslim background, she leaves the house wearing her school uniform alongside "a black hijab, a white shirt, a school tie, a black blazer, a short, black skirt, and white socks" (Mehmood, 2015, p. 23). The combination of the hijab and school uniform creates a visual juxtaposition between religious identification and the conventions of school dress. Rather than representing a straightforward rejection of one cultural affiliation in favour of another, her appearance illustrates how different aspects of identity can coexist. Read through Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity, this combination challenges the assumption that cultural and religious identities must be expressed through mutually exclusive forms of appearance. By bringing these elements together, Kiran makes her attempt to negotiate belonging visible. Moreover, the novel's later representation of her family relationships highlights a shift in her understanding of her mixed background. Her recognition of a brother, a sister, and "two Mums" (Mehmood, 2015, p. 172) indicates that her multiple affiliations may also provide possibilities for connection and inclusion. Her hybrid identity, therefore, is not represented exclusively as a source of conflict; it may also create opportunities for a broader understanding of family and belonging.

Mimicry offers another perspective on Kiran's attempts to establish her identity. During her early years, she appears to align herself with the dominant white English culture through her tastes, attitudes, and association with the Willow Tree Mob (WTM). Her bedroom, for instance, contains a poster of Lady Gaga (Mehmood, 2015, p. 1), a detail that contributes to the representation of her cultural preferences and social environment. More significantly, Kiran participates in her friends' derogatory references to the Muslim community living on the other side of the cemetery, whom they call "scarfies" (Mehmood, 2015, p. 65). Her participation in this language suggests an attempt to distance herself from the community associated with her father's religious and cultural background. When questioned about her beliefs, she responds, "I'm one of us" and "I'm not a Muslim" (Mehmood, 2015, p. 7). These statements show her desire to establish solidarity with the group whose acceptance she seeks. From the perspective of Bhabha's (1994) concept of mimicry, her behaviour can be examined as an attempt to align herself with dominant social expectations. However, her identification with the group does not guarantee acceptance. Instead, the need to distance herself from her own background reveals the pressure involved in seeking recognition through cultural conformity.

The limits of Kiran's agency become particularly apparent when Donna draws a cross on her forehead and declares, "Now you are a Christian" (Mehmood, 2015, p. 4). This episode reflects that Kiran's identity is not determined solely by her own choices; it is also shaped by the ways others classify and define her. Donna's action symbolically assigns Kiran a religious identity without establishing whether that identification corresponds to Kiran's own beliefs. The episode therefore highlights the power of social groups to impose categories of belonging. It also complicates the idea that cultural imitation necessarily results in acceptance. Even when Kiran attempts to align herself with the group, her identity remains subject to the judgements and decisions of others. Mimicry, in this context, exposes the limitations of conformity as a strategy for overcoming cultural differences and securing social recognition.

As the novel progresses, Kiran's relationship with mimicry changes direction. Following her rejection by the WTM, she turns towards her father's religious background and expresses her desire to belong: "I want to be a proper Muslim… Proper something!" (Mehmood, 2015, p. 36). Her repeated use of "proper" reveals that her search extends beyond religious affiliation to a more fundamental desire for legitimacy, recognition, and acceptance. The expression "Proper something!" is especially significant because it suggests that she seeks a secure identity at a time when she feels uncertain about who she is. Her attempt to establish a Muslim identity is also represented through observable practices. She learns to recite the Kalma, as indicated by the instruction "You have to recite the Kalmas" (Mehmood, 2015, p. 17), and purchases her "first hijab" (Mehmood, 2015, p. 17). These actions demonstrate her effort to familiarize herself with the practices associated with her father's religion. However, the significance of these practices lies not simply in their external form but in the identity and belonging that Kiran hopes to achieve through them. Her experience raises the question of whether adopting recognisable religious practices can secure acceptance when others continue to question the authenticity of her affiliation. Thus, the shift from identifying with the WTM to seeking acceptance within her father's religious community does not necessarily resolve her identity crisis; instead, it reveals the persistence of her search for recognition.

Ambivalence further illuminates the contradictions within Kiran's identity negotiation. When her peers ask, "You're Muslim, aren't you, Karen?" she responds, "I am. I'm proper, just like you" (Mehmood, 2015, p. 7). Her response is significant because it combines an affirmation of identity with an appeal to similarity. By claiming to be "proper, just like you," Kiran attempts to establish common ground with those who question her belonging. Her answer can be read as an effort to claim a Muslim identity while simultaneously seeking validation from her peers. Rather than demonstrating that she is entirely unaware of her own identity, the exchange discloses the difficulty of expressing that identity within a social environment in which belonging is

measured against expectations of conformity. Her response therefore captures the tension between self-identification and the need for external recognition.

A contrasting instance appears when Kiran teases her friend Laila and distances herself from her mother's identity by declaring, "I'm not proper like you" (Mehmood, 2015, p. 112). Read alongside her earlier statement, this remark exposes the changing significance of the word "proper" in different interpersonal contexts. In one instance, Kiran invokes the term to establish similarity; in the other, she uses it to mark a distinction between herself and another person. The contrast demonstrates how her expressions of identity are shaped by the people with whom she interacts and the social positions she seeks to occupy. This inconsistency is analytically significant because it uncovers the instability of the categories through which belonging is negotiated. Through Bhabha's (1994) concept of ambivalence, these contrasting statements can be interpreted as evidence of the tensions that emerge when identification involves both a desire for acceptance and an awareness of difference.

Kiran's changing relationship with her mother's religious background provides another indication of this ambivalence. Her recollection, "The last time I went to church with Mum…" (Mehmood, 2015, p. 10), introduces a moment of reflection on an earlier experience associated with Christianity. Considered within the broader context of her identity struggle, the reference to church invites an examination of how her relationship with her mother's religious affiliation changes as she questions previously accepted assumptions. Rather than simply reproducing the beliefs and practices associated with either parent, Kiran increasingly confronts the need to make sense of these affiliations for herself. Nevertheless, questioning inherited beliefs does not automatically resolve the tensions surrounding her identity. Instead, it suggests a developing awareness that belonging involves personal interpretation as well as the expectations imposed by others. Her emerging agency therefore coexists with continued uncertainty, illustrating the persistence of ambivalence throughout her identity negotiation.

The difficulties Kiran encounters become especially apparent through her rejection by both social groups. When she begins wearing the hijab, she faces humiliation and physical violence from her former WTM friends. At the same time, members of Shamshad's community question the authenticity of her religious affiliation and treat her faith as "dressing up" (Mehmood, 2015, p. 24). These contrasting responses expose the limitations of attempting to establish belonging through outward conformity. For her former friends, the hijab marks a departure from the identity they previously associated with her; for those within her father's community, her adoption of the hijab does not automatically establish her as an authentic member. Kiran is consequently positioned between competing expectations, with neither group fully recognizing her chosen identification. This double rejection demonstrates the social consequences of rigid boundaries surrounding cultural and religious belonging. It also shows why her identity crisis cannot be understood solely as an internal psychological struggle: it is intensified by the judgements and exclusions through which others regulate membership in their communities.

Ambivalence is not confined to Kiran; it is also suggested in the novel's representation of her mother. Kiran observes her mother "looking at me with eyes that seemed to flicker between different worlds, one where she saw me and the other where I couldn't see her" (Mehmood, 2015, p. 17). The image of eyes moving between different worlds evokes a sense of emotional distance and divided perception. It indicates that the cultural tensions surrounding Kiran may also affect her mother's understanding of their relationship and circumstances. The passage therefore extends the novel's representation of ambivalence beyond the protagonist, representing that the negotiation of cultural difference may affect relationships within the family. The mother's response can be interpreted as suggesting that the challenges associated with a mixed cultural and religious background are not experienced exclusively by the younger generation. However, the passage alone does not establish the mother's precise feelings; its significance lies in the uncertainty and separation conveyed through Kiran's perception of her.

Taken together, these episodes demonstrate that hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence are interconnected dimensions of Kiran's experience rather than separate stages in a linear journey towards identity formation. Hybridity provides a framework for understanding the intersection of her cultural and religious affiliations. Mimicry illuminates her attempts to secure acceptance by aligning herself with the expectations of different social groups. Ambivalence, in turn, helps explain the contradictions and uncertainties that emerge as these attempts encounter social rejection and conflicting demands. Kiran's movement between different forms of identification does not simply represent a transition from one fixed identity to another. Instead, it discloses the continuing negotiation of belonging within a social environment that repeatedly demands clear distinctions between cultural and religious categories. Her experiences demonstrate that neither the imitation of dominant cultural practices nor the deliberate adoption of her father's religious practices guarantees acceptance. Through Kiran's character, Mehmood presents identity as a process shaped by personal choices, social recognition, cultural expectations, and the power to define who belongs.

6. Conclusion

Tariq Mehmood's *You're Not Proper* (2015) offers a significant representation of the complexities of cultural identity, belonging, and exclusion in a postcolonial context. Through Kiran's experiences, the novel explores the challenges faced by an individual whose cultural and religious affiliations do not conform neatly to the categories established by the communities around her.

Her movement between the names Karen and Kiran, her changing relationship with her parents' religious backgrounds, and her encounters with social acceptance and rejection reveal the difficulties involved in negotiating a sense of self within competing cultural environments. The novel therefore presents identity not as a fixed or predetermined condition but as an ongoing process shaped by personal experience, social interaction, and the expectations of others.

The application of Bhabha's concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence illuminates different dimensions of this process. Hybridity helps explain how Kiran's intersecting cultural and religious affiliations complicate conventional assumptions about identity. Mimicry reveals her attempts to gain recognition by adopting practices associated with different social groups, while the concept of ambivalence illuminates the contradictions that arise when her desire for belonging conflicts with the judgements and exclusions she encounters. These concepts demonstrate that cultural adaptation does not necessarily produce social acceptance and that the adoption of particular religious or cultural practices cannot, by itself, eliminate the boundaries through which communities define membership.

Kiran's experiences also suggest that a hybrid identity should not be understood exclusively as a source of confusion or marginalization. Although her background exposes her to conflicting expectations and repeated rejection, the novel's representation of her family relationships also indicates the possibility of developing a broader understanding of belonging. Her recognition of multiple familial connections suggests that identities associated with different cultural and religious backgrounds need not always remain in opposition. Nevertheless, the novel does not present identity negotiation as a simple or final resolution of conflict. Rather, it foregrounds the continuing tension between self-identification and social recognition.

Ultimately, *You're Not Proper* contributes to postcolonial discussions of cultural identity by illustrating how belonging is negotiated within unequal social relationships and contested cultural boundaries. Through Kiran, Mehmood challenges the assumption that individuals must conform entirely to one cultural or religious identity to achieve acceptance. The novel highlights the limitations of assimilation as a means of overcoming exclusion and draws attention to the complex relationship between cultural hybridity, individual agency, and social recognition. Its representation of Kiran's experiences thus provides a basis for further research into the intersections of gender, religion, race, language, and identity in postcolonial and diasporic literature.

7. Recommendations

The study recommends that future researchers further investigate the relationship between hybridity, identity, religion, and cultural conflict in postcolonial literature. Future studies could examine Tariq Mehmood's *You're Not Proper* through alternative theoretical perspectives, such as feminist criticism, Marxist theory, diasporic studies, or psychoanalytic approaches, to develop a broader understanding of Kiran's identity formation and her negotiation of cultural and religious affiliations. Further research could also explore the roles of language, trauma, memory, and cultural dislocation in shaping hybrid identities and influencing individuals' sense of belonging. Such investigations would extend the discussion of identity formation in postcolonial literature and offer additional perspectives on the complex relationship between individual experience and wider sociocultural structures.

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