



ISLAMOPHOBIA AND THE PARADOX OF ASSIMILATION: RE-ISLAMIZATION AND QUEST FOR SELF IN MEHMOOD'S *YOU'RE NOT PROPER*

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Abstract

The paper investigates how the Western secular societies, even though they purport to be culturally neutral, unwillingly provide the conditions that push the Muslims to religious revival and self-identification. Through a close analysis of Kiran, who intentionally changes her name to Kiran, in *You're Not Proper* by Tariq Mehmood, the research claims that Islamophobia, racialized stereotypes, and existential pressures of secular liberalism create a crisis of unbelonging to second-generation Muslims youth. Rather than leading to assimilation, these forces enhance desires of coherence and authenticity through a conscious reversion to the basic Islamic values. Based on the theorization of re-Islamization by Olivier Roy, this paper shows how the character, Kiran, is a representation of a decultured Islam that is based on a core belief and not on inherited culture. To this, the difference between the Muslims by Culture and the Muslims by Practice by Malak can be used to explain how Kiran was able to change her disjointed half-Muslims identity into a consciously adopted Islamic selfhood. Her re-Islamization is both a spiritual awakening and a counter-discourse to the Western hegemonic discourses that distort Muslim subjectivities. The paper concludes that the experience of Kiran is a broader diasporic phenomenon where Islam is a place of dignity, empowerment, and ontological safety to Muslims who are trying to find their way through exclusion in the West.

Keywords: *Diaspora, Islamophobia, Neo-fundamentalism, Re-Islamization, Secularism, Muslim identity*

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1. Introduction

The contemporary world has witnessed a visible proliferation of Muslims across different regions, particularly within Western societies. This mobility has unsettled older assumptions that closely ties religion to a fixed territory, a homogeneous community, or a singular cultural space. Voluntary immigrants from Muslim-majority countries to Europe and other Western countries are often attracted by liberal values, economic opportunity, and promises of social mobility. Yet, these same Western societies have frequently responded with suspicion and hostility, generating racialized, stereotypical, and secularized environment in which Muslims communities are marginalized and scrutinized.

The events of 9/11 intensified these dynamics. The attacks did not simply remain isolated incidents of violence; they became the pivot for global narratives of security, identity, and otherness were reorganized. The post-9/11 discourse sharply divided the global community into “Muslims” and “non-Muslims” blocs, accelerating essentialist and stereotypical interpretations of Islam and Muslims (Shihada, 2015, p. 452). Linked to the rhetoric of the “war on terror,” this discourse promoted highly reductive frameworks that “abhor the consideration of other relative viewpoints” (Cilano, 2013, p. 193). Mamdani’s description of 9/11 as “unfinished business of the Cold War” (Kanwal, 2015, p. 6) situates these events within a longer geopolitical history involving Pakistan, America, and South Asian states from the late 1970s onwards. Processes such as Islamization, the disintegration of the USSR, and the shift in American policy from “pro-Taliban to anti-Taliban” helped produce radical organizations configured to confront the West (Kanwal, 2015, p. 8).

Within this matrix, the “war on terror” did not simply target certain groups, it gradually mis-constructed Muslims as potential terrorists. Hazardous acts like terrorism, suicide bombings, and forms of political Islam were attached to Islamic discourse in general. As a result, “Muslimhood” became a stereotypical image of barbarism, and Pakistan was cast as a primary “abode” of terrorist activity. Kanwal describes this shift as a move from “orientalist epistemology to terrorist ontology,” (Kanwal, 2015, p. 3) whereby the Muslims is no longer an exotic other but an existential threat. Such representations have been widely circulated in media and political rhetoric. Islamophobia, as Puar notes, “intersects with other forms of discrimination, compounding the experiences of marginalization for Muslims women and minorities” (Puar, 2007, p. 120). Meer and Modood,(2009) similarly observes that “the social exclusion of Muslims is exacerbated by Islamophobic attitudes that stigmatize their religious practices and cultural expressions,” (Meer and Modood, 2009, p. 489) while Fekete argues that political discourse perpetuates “negative stereotypes and prejudices against Muslims” (Fekete , 2009, p. 140) by framing Islam as fundamentally incompatible with Western values.

At the same time, an older and deeper tension exist between secular Western states and institutional religions such as Christianity and Islam. With the gradual development of modern societies, the Western secular state increasingly confined religion to the private sphere, treating it as a personal or domestic matter. This reconfiguration of the relationship between religion and state has reshaped all societies it touches, including both Muslims-majority regions and the West. Olivier Roy argues that religious revivalism must be read against “the weakening of the state, supranationalism, civil societies, and the democratization of authoritarian regimes” (Roy, 2005). Secularization, in his view, is not simply the decline of religion but a social process that penetrates economic, sociological, and intellectual spaces, redefining how religion is lived and expressed. It “provokes specificity of religious expressions,” and leads to the reconstruction of religious identity as a minority position (Roy, 2005, p. 2).

In highly secularized contexts, religion is no longer taken for granted, and individuals are compelled to define themselves explicitly as believers or non-believers. This produces sharper boundaries between religious and secular identities, heightening the visibility of religious markers and rendering certain believers legible as minorities. Roy suggests that what appears as a “return” of religion in the contemporary moment can only be understood against the backdrop of secularization, not as a simple continuation of traditional forms but as a reconstitution of religious patterns outside the old state-religion dyads (Roy, 2005, p. 2).

Multiculturalism, grounded in secular liberalism, has struggled to accommodate Islam within Western public spheres. Anshuman Mondal, in *“Islam and Multiculturalism: Some Thoughts on a Difficult Relationship,”* argues that multicultural discourse finds Islam “somewhat indigestible,” and that this indigestion reveals “a deeper crisis of secular knowledge and of those discourses that have emerged from it, such as liberalism, in the fraught and paradoxical context of globalization.” The failure here is not simply of Islam to “fit” into multiculturalism, but of liberal political culture itself to construct a secular fabric capable of embracing genuine ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity.

The gap between sacred norms and secular values thus becomes increasingly difficult to bridge. Sacred norms are non-negotiable for believers, whereas secular norms restrict religion’s relevance in public spaces (Roy, 2016). Secularists tend to view visible religious symbols as threats to public neutrality; religious communities, in turn, strive to make their norms binding, even morally superior, within secular societies. Each side demands compromise, while neither is willing to concede what it considers fundamental. In this context, modern Western media often promote the idea that political Islam and jihadist movements are the primary sources of extremism among Muslims living in the West, further intensifying Islamophobic suspicion.

Roy intervenes in this debate by arguing that Islamic fundamentalism is “a product of globalization rather than a conflict between different cultures or religions” (Roy, 2004). The deterritorialization and globalization of Islam, through the growth of Muslims populations outside traditional Muslims-majority regions, generate new forms of religiosity. Radical groups, Islamists, “born-again” Muslims, neo-fundamentalists, Sufis, and nationalist movements can all be read as responses to the pressures of global modernity rather than simple revivals of pre-modern tradition. As Bilgrami (1992, p. 33) points out, Islamic revivalism in places such as South Asia, North Africa, and parts of England often emerges as a defensive response to continued colonial and postcolonial histories which have shaped conceptions of the Muslims community in relation to Western power and secular authority.

Within this broad theoretical and historical context, this study examines Tariq Mehmood’s *You’re Not Proper* (2019), a young adult novel that dramatizes the complex negotiation of Muslims identity in a Western setting. The novel follows Karan, originally Kiran, who is Muslims from her father’s side and Christian from her mother’s side, living in the predominantly white area of West Boarhead. Her classmate Shamshad, by contrast, lives in South Asian immigrant-dominated East Boarhead. When Karan falls in with a group of xenophobic white youth led by Donna, she becomes a target of Islamophobic and racist hostility; Donna calls her “half-Muslims, half-Christian” and forcibly draws a cross on her forehead. This violence pushes Karan to rediscover her Muslim roots and reclaim her original name, Kiran.

The narrative juxtaposes Karan/Kiran’s journey with that of Shamshad, whose Muslim identity is shaped by tradition and culture rather than conscious re-identification. Their conflict, social, religious, and familial, stages the tension between being “Muslims by culture” and “Muslims by practice,” a distinction suggested by Malak. As Karan begins to learn Islamic fundamentals, wear the hijab, and attend the mosque, she transitions from a confused hybrid identity to a more self-consciously practicing Muslim self. The novel thus becomes a literary exploration of how Western Islamophobic patterns and secular environments can, paradoxically, stimulate a process of re-Islamization and identity reformulation. As Modood (2007) observes, “Muslims communities in the West navigate a complex landscape of identity, balancing their religious practices with the pressures to assimilate.”

2. Statement of the Problem

Despite a substantial body of scholarship on Islamophobia, secularism, and Muslims diasporic identity after 9/11, relatively little attention has been paid to how Western prejudice and secular social structures “enable” a renewed turn toward Islamic practice among young Muslims in literary narratives. Much critical discourse focuses on radicalization, security concerns, and cultural incompatibility, but less work explores how

ordinary, non-violent Muslims subjects in the West negotiate their identities in everyday contexts marked by racism and Islamophobia.

Thesis Statement

This paper discusses and analyses the way in which the novel *You're Not Proper* is a depiction of Islamophobic and stereotypical practices in the West and how this situation leads to the re-identification and re-Islamization of its main character. It explores the influence of Western secular and prejudiced forces on the path of Karan/Kiran as a divided and fragmented identity to a religious identity that is consciously adopted. By so doing, the research re-reads re-Islamization not as a symptom of extremism, but as a complicated process of self-discovery and moral re-positioning.

2.1. Research Questions

The study postulates the following questions:

- I. How does Tariq Mehmood's *You're Not Proper* challenge stereotypes constructed against Muslims and exposes Islamophobia embedded in Western communities?
- II. What are the ways the adult/near-adult characters, especially Karan/Kiran, in *You're Not Proper*, re-identify themselves in the secular society?

2.2. Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the growing body of scholarship on Islamophobia and Muslim identity in Western contexts by foregrounding a literary narrative that has not yet received sustained critical attention. Although Tariq Mehmood is an acknowledged British-Pakistani writer, *You're Not Proper* remains underexplored in academic criticism, particularly in relation to theories of re-Islamization and identity reformulation.

2.3. Delimitation of the Study

This research narrows its focus to a single primary text and a specific set of theoretical concerns. It examines the experience of Muslims individuals within Western societies *only* through the literary lens of Tariq Mehmood's *You're Not Proper*, concentrating particularly on the character of Karan/Kiran. The study does not attempt to generalize its findings to all Western Muslim experiences or to provide a comprehensive sociological survey. Instead, it offers a close textual analysis that explores the interplay between Western liberal-secular environment and its impact on religious identity as represented in this novel. Theoretical delimitation is also important. The study primarily employs Roy's concept of re-Islamization and Malak's distinction between "Muslims by Culture" and "Muslims by Practice". Other theoretical models of identity, diaspora, and secularism are not explored in detail, even though they may be relevant.

3. Literature Review

This section synthesizes academic debates on Islamophobia, Muslim identity formation in Western secular societies, and re-Islamization or religious revival as

articulated through globalization and sociopolitical pressures. By examining key studies in these areas, this chapter establishes the intellectual context for analysing *You're Not Proper* and demonstrates how existing scholarship prepares the ground for examining identity reconfiguration among Western Muslims youth.

3.1. Islamophobia, Stereotyping, and Muslims Identity in Western Secular Societies

Scholarly work consistently demonstrates that the post-9/11 scenario created an unprecedented intensification of Islamophobic sentiment, resulting in altered identity formations for Muslims in the West. Awan and Zempi (2016) argue that Islamophobia produces “psychological impacts... contributing to a sense of alienation and marginalization” among Muslims communities (p. 102). This sense of exclusion is not limited to interpersonal discrimination but is reproduced structurally through media discourses, state surveillance, and cultural stereotyping. Morey and Yaqin (2011) maintain that “the normalization of Islamophobia in public discourse has led to the legitimization of discriminatory practices” against Muslims (p. 58), demonstrating how Islamophobia shifts from being a social attitude to an institutionalised pattern of exclusion.

Stereotyping and racialised perceptions of Muslims also receive attention in research that emphasizes how Western societies have a tendency to reduce Muslim identities to limited categories of extremists, backward or violent. Foner and Alba (2008) note that the Muslims in Europe and North America have “frequently faced suspicion and prejudice, impacting their ability to fully participate in civic life” (p. 378). On the same note, Peek (2011) observes that stigmatization erodes the sense of belonging among Muslims by “fracturing their religious and civic identities” (p. 66).

This trajectory reflects what Kanwal (2015) identifies as the shift from “orientalist epistemology to terrorist ontology” (p. 3), where Islam is no longer viewed as a culturally different phenomenon but rather as a violent phenomenon. Mamdani (2002) further extends this criticism by demonstrating how political rhetoric has created the binaries of good Muslims/bad Muslims that dehistoricize Muslim subjectivities and negate the political circumstances of the world. Modood (2019) further argues that Islamophobia functions as a form of “anti-Muslims cultural racism” that delegitimizes Muslim agency and subjectivity (p. 5). All these studies emphasize the role of Western discourses in creating hostile environments that enforce Muslims to renegotiate their identities and religious devotions.

In this framework, Islamophobia is a source of identity reclaiming, especially among younger Muslims who are traversing between hybrid cultures. According to Haddad and Smith (2002), the second-generation is struggling with some special problems associated with preserving religious and cultural identity and adapting to secular societies. These struggles are the context of Mehmood’s *You're Not Proper*, in which the identity crisis of the protagonist is exacerbated by racist bullying, cultural exclusion, and the competing

demands of the Muslims and the non-Muslims communities. Thus, the scholarship on Islamophobia and stereotyping underscores three key insights necessary for this study:

- Islamophobia produces psychological and social fractures in Muslim identity.
- Western discourse racializes Islam, framing it as incompatible with liberal/secular values.
- Muslims youth often respond through intensified religious exploration or return to Islamic fundamentals.

3.2. Globalization, Secularism, and Re-Islamization

The research on globalization and the changes in religion offer a second foundation to explain the identity changes in the story. Lukens-Bull conceptualizes Islamization not as a defensive revival but as “part of globalization itself,” suggesting that Muslims “participate actively in globalising processes” concurrent with Western capitalism (2012, p. 15). This understanding is a response to the supposition that Islamization is merely a result of cultural struggle or response politics; rather, it arises out of the exchange of ideas, migration movement, and the redistribution of power in modernity.

Investigating the Bosnian Muslim communities, Mesaric (2015) proves that Islamic revival is frequently a matter of everyday practices instead of political ideology. She contends that religion has been become “a personalized faith... allowing individuals to articulate the self through Islamic discourse” (2015, p. 144). This image reflects the situation of young Muslims in the diaspora community who rely on religious practice as a stabilizing identity framework in the face of the secular pressures.

Ramos (2018) also provides a significant change of theoretical perspective, as he correlates secularization to the emergence of the so-called “religiosity”, which is a decultured religion where the old rules are broken to pieces, and people are forced to make their own definition of faith. Ramos, in his interpretation of Roy’s theorisation, claims that Western secularism separates religion and culture, which prepares the fertile ground of new and individualistic versions of Islamic identity.

Lorne Dawson (2012) criticizes Roy’s idea of “Islamization of radicalism,” but also confirms that the radicalism of the Western context is identity crisis exacerbated by marginalization and not necessarily by theological motives (p. 80). Dawson emphasizes that second-generation Muslims tend to experience “generational rupture, cultural rupture, and political rupture” the very rupture Kiran goes through in *You’re Not Proper* (Dawson, 2012, p. 83).

The works of Roy are of particular importance in this study. He claims in *Globalized Islam* (2004) that deterritorialization has transformed Muslims in the West to redefine Islam as a pure religion that is not associated with a particular culture (p. 3). His point that Muslims want religious revival as religion has lost its social authority (2004, p. ix) is close to the novel, where Kiran is re-Islamized in the environment where secular

values prevail in the life of people. Similarly, the interpretation of identity reassertion in the novel also follows through Roy analysis of neo-fundamentalism; a type of Islam based on strict adherence as opposed to political motives.

Roy's argument that re-Islamization reflects "uprooting from given societies" and forces individuals to "invent, define, and objectify" their religion (2004, p. 131) directly frames Kiran's shift from cultural confusion to religious clarity.

Overall, scholarship on globalization and secularism illustrates that:

- I. Migration and secular environments generate a form of Islam detached from traditional cultures.
- II. Young Muslims often respond to identity uncertainty through re-Islamization.
- III. Re-Islamization is not inherently radical—often, it is a personal search for coherence and belonging.

3.3. Literary and Cultural Representations of Muslims Identity in Western Contexts

Since fictional narratives are frequently a reflection and critique of sociopolitical reality, literature can prove helpful in the study of re-Islamization and identity reconstruction. Nevertheless, scholarly work that directly examines Muslims youth identity in the modern British fiction is scarce.

Sadia Abbas (2011) addresses the issue of Western secular structures failing to accommodate visible Islamic religiosity and suggests that global Islamophobia "transnational Muslims polity constituted by the offence" (p. 3). This is echoed in Mehmoods depiction of Kiran whose conversion is influenced by the non-Muslims and the non-Muslims of his own community.

In her review of *You're Not Proper*, Claire Chambers (2015) recognizes the significance of the novel as a relatively scarce depiction of *British Muslim girls in the Young Adult fiction*. She praises Mehmood for addressing class differences, religious prejudice, and Islamophobic aggression, describing the novel as "political through and through" (Chambers, 2015, p. 2). Yet Chambers focuses primarily on representation, not on identity transformation or re-Islamization as theoretical concepts.

Myriad scholarly reviews highlight the novel's engagement with racism, belonging, and teenage struggles, but do not analyse the deeper theoretical implications of reidentification, secular pressure, or neo-fundamentalist revival. The discussions on Muslim identity in diaspora literature, such as McLoughlin's (2006) work on Bradford's postcolonial landscape, address racism, multiculturalism, and generational tensions, but do not consider religious revival as a specific identity response. Mamdani (2002) and Kanwal (2015) critique post-9/11 politics and stereotyping, yet again, the theme of neo-fundamentalist identity reconstruction in fiction remains understudied.

3.4. Research Gap

Although extensive scholarship exists on Islamophobia, diaspora identity, and Muslims representation in Western societies, no existing study examines how re-Islamization functions as a literary mechanism of identity reconstruction for young Muslim characters in British fiction, particularly in the context of post-9/11 secular and Islamophobic environments. Reviews of *You're Not Proper* discuss racism, belonging, and multicultural conflict, but none analyse the protagonist's shift from cultural hybridity to religious practice through the theoretical lenses of Olivier Roy's re-Islamization and Amina Malak's distinction between Muslims by culture and Muslims by practice.

Thus, the research gap lies in the absence of a scholarly examination of how Islamophobic pressure and secular environments catalyse religious re-identification in Muslim youth within contemporary English fiction. This study addresses the exiting gap by analysing *You're Not Proper* through Roy and Malak, thereby demonstrating how Western hostility paradoxically fosters a return to Islamic fundamentals among young Muslims.

3.5. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the theoretical contributions of Olivier Roy and Amin Malak, whose ideas together illuminate how Muslim identities are reconfigured in Western secular contexts. Roy's work on globalized Islam, secularism, deterritorialization and re-Islamization provides the macro-sociological frame, while Malak's distinction between "Muslims by culture" and "Muslims by practice" offers a fine-grained tool for reading character identities in Mehmood's *You're Not Proper*. Through these combined lenses, the novel is approached as a literary site where the pressures of secularism, Islamophobia, and cultural loss produce a renewed turn toward Islamic practice.

Roy argues that contemporary manifestations of Islamic revivalism cannot be understood as a simple return to a traditional past, nor as a straightforward "clash of civilizations." In *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (2004), he contends that Islamic fundamentalism is "a product of globalization rather than a conflict between different cultures or religions" (Roy, 2004, p. 3). Globalization and deterritorialization, "the growth of Islam and Muslims outside of the traditional Muslims world", dislocate religion from its old cultural anchors, forcing Muslims in the diaspora to rethink what Islam means when it is no longer embedded in a familiar social environment (Roy, 2004, p. ix). He describes "global Muslims" as those who migrate to non-Muslims societies, or who relate to a universal *ummah* instead of a specific local culture and notes that a "third of the whole of Muslims reside out of countries where Muslims make up the majority" (Roy, 2004, pp. 3). In such contexts, Islam becomes a consciously chosen identity and a portable moral code, rather than a taken-for-granted cultural inheritance.

For Roy, secularization in Europe is not the disappearance of religion but the reconfiguration of the relationship between religion, state, and society. In his research

project *Rethinking the Place of Religion in European Secularized Societies* he argues that conflicts around religion today are less about institutional church–state struggles and more about “the sharing of a common set of values and norms” (Roy, 2016). European societies are “highly secularized... on all levels whether it is legal or constitutional, cultural or sociological,” and yet religion appears more visible than before (Roy, 2016).

This alienation generates what Roy describes as deculturation: religion loses its connection with ethnic and local cultures. In *Holy Ignorance: When Religion and Culture Part Ways*, (2010) he relates that globalization has fostered “a modern disconnection or separation between faith circles and socio-cultural identities” and has provided fertile ground to fundamentalist movements that purport to restore the faithful to the spirit of the faith (Roy, 2010). Religion is no longer part of a dense cultural fabric, but an austere scriptural endeavour, where direct emotional contact with the divine is promoted, at the expense of tradition and intellectual mediation.

These dynamics shape Roy’s understanding of re-Islamization. In a globalized environment, “globalization means uprooting from given societies in an attempt to develop systems of thought that are no longer linked to a given culture” (Roy, 2004, pp. 131-132). As Muslims migrate, or grow up as minorities, they are compelled to “reinvent, rediscover, or define what belongs to the religious essence” (Roy, 2006). Re-Islamization, in this sense, is a process in which individuals turn toward a “pure” Islam, often Salafi or neo-fundamentalist, stripped of folkloric and regional elements. This turn is not only a backlash against Islamophobia, but also a response to the moral and symbolic vacuum of secular societies that do not recognize religious norms in the public sphere.

While Roy explains why and how Muslims in Western contexts may turn to a purified, de-territorialized Islam, Amin Malak provides a vocabulary for describing what kinds of Muslims identity are at stake. In *Muslims Narratives and the Discourse of English*, Malak defines a Muslims as “the person who espouses the religion of Islam or is shaped by its cultural impact, irrespective of being secular, agnostic, or practising believer,” whereas “the term Islamic emphasizes the faith of Islam. It denotes thoughts, rituals, activities, and institutions specifically proclaimed and sanctioned by Islam or directly associated with its theological traditions” (2004, pp. 5-6).

Most crucially for this study, Malak differentiates between “Muslims by culture” and “Muslims by practice”. The notion of “Muslims by culture” is “rooted emotionally in the culture and civilization of Islam” but may not perform the core rituals of the faith; “Muslims by practice” are the ones who actively “practises the fundamentals of Islam” (Malak, 2004, p. 5). The two categories may overlap, but they are not identical: cultural attachment does not guarantee religious observance. This distinction provides a precise way to read the characters in *You’re Not Proper*: Shamshad stands closer to the “Muslims by practice” model, shaped by a traditional religious environment, while Karan/Kiran

moves from an unstable, culturally fragmented position toward becoming a “Muslims by practice” through re-Islamization.

Taken together, Roy and Malak offer a powerful integrated lens for this research. Roy’s theory explains the structural conditions; secularism, deterritorialization, Islamophobia, and identity crisis, that make re-Islamization both necessary and attractive for young Muslims in the West. Malak’s categories help to map the outcome of this process at the level of character, tracing the movement from cultural ambiguity or suppression to conscious religious practice. This framework allows the study to show how *You’re Not Proper* dramatizes the re-identification of Muslims youth in Western secular societies not as a slide into terrorism, but as a search for ethical coherence, belonging, and a “proper” self within a globalized and hostile environment.

4. Analysis and Discussion

This chapter examines Mehmood’s *You’re Not Proper* through the theoretical lenses of Olivier Roy’s concepts of globalization, secularism, and re-Islamization (2004; 2010; 2016), and Amin Malak’s distinction between *Muslims by culture* and *Muslims by practice* (2004). The results of analysis demonstrate that the Islamophobic and secular atmosphere of Boarhead does not simply marginalise Karan; it paradoxically pushes her towards neo-fundamentalist re-Islamization, enabling her to move from a fractured, hybrid identity (Karen/Karey) to a self-conscious Muslims subject (Kiran). At the same time, the contrast between Kiran and Shamshad dramatizes Malak’s distinction between “Muslims by culture” and “Muslims by practice” revealing the tensions between traditional, culture-bound Islam and a deculturated, individually chosen Islam shaped in a secular Western context.

4.1. Islamophobia, Stereotype and the Crisis of Belonging

The narrative opens in a climate saturated with xenophobic and Islamophobic discourse, echoing the post-9/11 atmosphere described by Kanwal as a shift “from orientalist epistemology to terrorist ontology,” where Muslims are homogenised as a threatening, monolithic category (Kanwal, 2015, p. 3). In *You’re Not Proper*, such abstract discourse is rendered into the everyday cruelty of school corridors, alleyways, and gang rituals in Boarhead West.

Karan is initially placed in a position of hybrid uncertainty; she is “half-Muslim and half-Christian”, renamed Karen/Karey to meet the demands of the West, and inducted into the WTM gang under the leadership of Donna. She thinks she fits in there, until a sequence of embarrassing incidents shows her that her seemingly temporary acceptance is conditional and precarious. Donna’s actions, drawing a cross on Karan’s forehead, announcing “Now you are a Christian,” and insisting “I’ll make you proper” (Mehmood, 2019, p. 3), are not merely bullying gestures; they are enactments of a symbolic conversion

that attempts to erase Karan's Muslims inheritance and fix her within a white Christian norm.

The gang's taunts, calling her "not proper," mocking her brown skin through racist rhymes, naming her "Islamic" or "Muslimic" as an insult, reflect exactly the Islamophobic discourses documented by Meer and Modood, in which Muslims are racialised through a mixture of religion, colour and culture. Islam is reduced to a stigmatized identity marker, and Karan's mixed background becomes a source of ridicule rather than richness. As Foner and Alba note, Muslims in Western societies "frequently face suspicion and prejudice, impacting their ability to fully participate in civic life" (Foner et al., 2008, p. 378); for Karan, this translates into a psychic impossibility of "just being nice" (p. 54).

This social pressure produces a profound crisis of self-recognition. In one of the key moments, Karan realises: "They never saw me as I saw them. I never saw me as they saw me. I thought I was just me. And who was I? Mixed-race? Oreo? Christian? Muslims?" (Mehmood, 2019, p. 9). Here, the novel dramatizes what Awan and Zempi describe as the "psychological impacts" of Islamophobia, including alienation and fragmented identity (2016, p. 102). Karan discovers that her self-image "just me" is constantly overruled by external labels, half-caste, *kali gori*, not proper, that position her as neither fully white nor fully Muslims, neither fully Christian nor fully Pakistani.

At the same time, the scarf-wearing girls from East Boarhead, especially Shamshad and Leila, taunt Karan as a half-caste and white inside, accusing her of betraying Islam by fraternising with racist whites (Mehmood, 2019). She is thus doubly rejected: condemned by white secular peers for not being white enough, and by Muslims peers for not being Muslims enough. This mirrors the "double consciousness" and "double exclusion" often described in migration literature, but the novel pushes beyond lament to show how these pressures become the starting point of Karan's re-Islamization.

The cross carved onto her forehead, intended to erase her Muslimsness, becomes a decisive turning point. The pain and humiliation provoke deep introspection, leading her to question her identity and sense of belonging. Instead of accepting the imposed Christian identity, she begins to move toward Islam not as an inherited cultural identity, but as a consciously chosen faith. In Roy's terms, this is precisely what happens when religion is decoupled from culture: believers are forced to "reinvent, rediscover, or define what belongs to the religious essence" (Roy, 2006). Islamophobic acts thus unintentionally awaken the "Muslimic spirit" that Donna and her gang ridicule.

This directly answers the second research question: Western Islamophobic patterns and stereotypes, far from simply subduing Muslims identity, act as a stimulus that drives Karan to seek a more anchored, practising Islam. The insult "You're not proper, not like us" is converted into Karan's determination to become "a proper Muslims... proper

something” (Mehmood, 2019, p. 40), reframing “properness” away from whiteness and towards religious commitment.

4.2. Secular Space, Deculturation and Re-Islamization

The hostile climate in *You're Not Proper* is not only racial; it is also profoundly secular. West Boarhead stands for the kind of secularised European public sphere Roy describes, where religion is expected to be private and invisible, while “secular values” such as individual autonomy, sexual freedom and expressive rights are sacralised (Roy, 2016). The WTM gang embodies this secular assumption, treating Christian identity more as cultural whiteness than as serious faith, and reacting with anger when Muslims symbols, like Shamshad’s hijab, enter public space. The ripping of Shamshad’s scarf is thus a miniature version of the broader European discomfort with visible religion in public (Roy, 2016).

Within Karan’s family, we see the deculturation and confusion Roy associates with globalized religion. Her father is a Pakistani Muslims who drinks alcohol and eats bacon, while her mother is a non-believing Christian who continues to attend church (Mehmood, 2019). Both parents are disconnected from the core demands of their respective faiths: Islam has been reduced to ethnicity and nostalgia for the father, and Christianity to ritual habit for the mother. Malak’s categories illuminate this: both parents can be seen as Muslims/Christians by culture, not by practice (Malak, 2004). Karan inherits this confusion; she knows fragments of Qur’anic recitation from her grandfather, and fragments of church ritual from her mother, but neither faith provides a coherent framework for living.

Secular British society, meanwhile, offers freedom but not belonging. As Roy argues, European secularism often results in a “reconfiguration of the relationship between society and religion,” where religious symbols become “too conspicuous to be innocent” and religious practice is squeezed out of everyday life (Roy, 2016). Karan experiences this reconfiguration in her own body: her tentative attempts to wear hijab are met with stares, ridicule, and mockery from both sides. When she first appears in hijab and a miniskirt, she realises how badly she has misjudged the visual language of modesty; she calls herself “mixed up rubbish”, (Mehmood, 2019, p. 25) recognising that she has not yet fully understood what practising Islam entails.

Yet this same secular context creates the conditions for re-Islamization. Because religion is no longer embedded in shared culture, Karan must objectify Islam, in Roy’s sense: she seeks out books, DVDs, and instruction on how to pray, fast, and understand the Prophet’s life (Roy, 2004). Her mother unexpectedly participates by buying her hijab, a long kurta and introductory Islamic texts; her father brings the book titled *Islam for Dummies*. Rather than being imposed by a community, Islam becomes a project of

individual learning and self-transformation, precisely the kind of deculturated religiosity Roy associates with neo-fundamentalism (Roy, 2010).

Karan's journey from Karen/Karey to Kiran thus exemplifies Roy's claim that globalization and migration produce "global Muslims" who relate to a universal "ummah" rather than a specific local culture (Roy, 2004, p. ix). She does not simply "return" to a Pakistani Islam of her parents; instead, she constructs a more scriptural, principle-based Islam, distinguished from both her father's lax practice and Shamshad's culturally bounded religiosity. This is re-Islamization in Roy's sense: a move to "pure" faith, detached from territory and tradition, prompted by the tensions of secular culture and Islamophobic exclusion (Roy, 2004, p. 3).

This answers the first research question at a structural level: Karan re-identifies herself as a Muslims not by passively inheriting a culture, but by responding to the combined forces of secularism and Islamophobia with a conscious, neo-fundamentalist turn to practice. Her transformation is not orchestrated by an imam, a mosque hierarchy, or a political movement; it is narrated as an intimate, ethical and existential choice.

4.3. Shamshad and Kiran: Muslims by Culture, Muslims by Practice

The contrast between Shamshad and Kiran allows the novel to stage Malak's distinction between "Muslims by culture" and "Muslims by practice" (Malak, 2004, pp. 5–6). Shamshad initially appears as the proper Muslims girl: she wears hijab, avoids music and television, and lives under strict parental control. She tells us there are "no pictures on any walls" because her father forbids them as "un-Islamic," and that the only modern object in the house, a computer, is mainly used by her mother to contact relatives in Pakistan (Mehmood, 2019). Religion here is tightly entangled with culture, patriarchy, and transnational family networks. Shamshad's fear, when her hijab is ripped, centres on her father's reaction rather than on God or her own conviction; her anxiety is about honour and obedience more than about belief.

From Malak's perspective, Shamshad is a Muslims by culture: emotionally and socially rooted in an Islamic civilizational world, but without clear space for personal choice (Malak, 2004). Her hostility towards Karan, calling her "half-caste daughter" (Mehmood, 2019, p. 141), "You pathetic copycat" (Mehmood, 2019, p. 57) and later mocking her for changing her name and religion, suggests that her own identity is fragile and defensive. When Karan later encounters Shamshad in Manchester without hijab, in a low-cut top and short skirt, this hypocrisy exposes the gap between Shamshad's publicly displayed Islam and her private experimentation. The cultural script of respectable Muslims girl clashes with her own desires.

Kiran's path is the opposite. She begins as culturally assimilated, listening to Lady Gaga, centred on the giant poster in her room, absorbed into a white gang and religiously hollow. Over the course of the novel, she moves away from both her mother's perfunctory

Christianity and her father's half-forgotten Islam, towards a self-conscious practice of prayer, Qur'an reading, and hijab. She explicitly asks her father to teach her how to be a good Muslims and declares, "I want to be a proper Muslims... Proper something" (Mehmood, 2019, p. 40). Malak's category of Muslims by practice fits her by the end: she chooses to perform the fundamentals of Islam, prayer, modesty, confession of faith, out of conviction, not inherited routine.

The conflict between Shamshad and Kiran symbolises the tension between traditional/cultured religion and deculturated neo-fundamentalist faith. Shamshad despises Kiran's conversion as fashion, accusing her: "You are Karen one day and Kiran the next... You go to church one day... and the next you come here" (Mehmood, 2019, p.72). Yet this anger reveals her discomfort with a form of Islam that is chosen rather than imposed, and that threatens to expose the inconsistencies in her own culturally constrained practice. Their final "joint win" in the school race can be read as a metaphor: both cultural and practising forms of Islam are present in diaspora, both shaped by the pressures of secularism and racism, and both struggling to claim authenticity.

By the end of the novel, however, the narrative grants moral centrality to Kiran's practising subjectivity. She rejects the WTM gang, clarifies her name, "It's Kiran Dad... It'll always be Kiran" (Mehmood, 2019, p. 39) and refuses to attend church, explaining to her mother that "Your Jesus is white. Your Holy Mother is white, and The Father must be white as well. Look at me! Just look at me!" (Mehmood, 2019, p.43). Her refusal is not only religious but racial: Christianity as culturally whitened cannot accommodate her brown body. Islam, in its deculturated, universal form, becomes the space where she can be both brown and "proper."

Thus, in terms of the research questions, the Shamshad–Kiran contrast shows:

- How re-Islamization (Kiran's chosen practice) offers a stable identity where hybrid cultural and secular models fail.
- How Islamophobic and racist pressures intensify Kiran's need for a firm religious self, while Shamshad's cultural Islam is shown as brittle under those same pressures.

4.4. Re-Identification and the Paradox of "Properness"

Ultimately, *You're Not Proper* dramatizes Roy's argument that Western secular societies unintentionally produce religious revival by decoupling religion from culture and by treating visible religiosity as problematic (Roy, 2010; 2016). The more Kiran is told she is "not proper" by her white peers, the more she rejects their definition of properness; the more she is called "half-Muslims" by Shamshad's group, the more she seeks to become fully Muslims by practice. Islamophobia, racism, and secular discomfort with religion do not destroy faith in the novel; they catalyse a re-Islamization that is deeply personal and ethically serious.

The novel therefore answers the study's questions in a nuanced way. First, Karan/Karey re-identifies as Kiran by undergoing a process of re-Islamization shaped by globalization and secularism in Roy's sense. Her identity shifts from hybrid confusion to a consciously articulated religious subjectivity, grounded in practice rather than mere heritage. Second, Western Islamophobic and stereotypical behaviours, gang bullying, racist jokes, symbolic conversion, scarf-ripping, push her towards Islamic fundamentals, confirming Roy's insight that "Islamic fundamentalism is a product of globalization" rather than its enemy (Roy, 2004, p. 3). Malak's distinction between Muslims by culture and Muslims by practice enables us to see that Kiran's "properness" is not a return to an idealised past but the construction of a new, practising, deculturated Islam from within a secular British town.

In doing so, *You're Not Proper* refuses dominant narratives that associate religious revival only with violence or extremism. Instead, it portrays re-Islamization as a search for belonging, coherence and dignity by a young girl who has been told repeatedly that she is "not proper", not white enough, not Muslims enough, not Western enough. The novel suggests that in an Islamophobic, secular environment, the path to becoming "proper" for characters like Kiran lies not in assimilation or cultural compromise, but in reclaiming Islam as a lived, practising faith.

5. Findings and Conclusion

By reading *You're Not Proper* through Olivier Roy's concepts of globalization, secularism and re-Islamization (2004; 2010; 2016) and Amin Malak's distinction between *Muslims by culture* and *Muslims by practice* (2004, pp. 5–6), the study uncovers that Islamophobia, secularization and the globalization of Islam do not merely oppress Muslims in Western spaces; they actively participate in generating a renewed, self-conscious Islamic subjectivity.

First of all, the analysis confirms that Islamophobic and stereotypical behaviours in secular Western societies become a catalyst for re-identification and re-Islamization. Characters like Karan are continually reminded that they are "not proper," "half-caste," or "Muslimic" in a derogatory way. These repeated humiliations create a deep crisis of belonging that cannot be resolved within the categories of whiteness or casual cultural Christianity. Instead of erasing her Muslimness, such hostility forces Karan to ask who she really is and where she truly belongs, pushing her towards a deliberate embrace of Islam as faith and practice rather than as inherited label. In this way, the study shows that Islamophobia paradoxically strengthens, rather than dissolves, religious commitment.

Second, the research demonstrates that secularized Western societies, rather than simply suppressing religion, create the very space in which religious revival becomes possible. Roy's argument that secularism decouples religion from culture and pushes believers to redefine what "counts" as religious essence (Roy, 2004, pp. 131–132) is

clearly borne out in the novel. Karan's parents embody cultural, diluted forms of Islam and Christianity; Karan, by contrast, is forced by the secular and hostile environment to seek a more coherent, scriptural understanding of Islam. The novel thus supports Roy's claim that contemporary neo-fundamentalism is not a return to "traditional" village Islam but the product of a global, de-territorialized, secular context in which religion is chosen, learned and practised consciously.

Third, the paper firmly establishes that the globalization and de-acculturation of Islam promote neo-fundamentalism. The narrative does not show a nostalgic return to Pakistani cultural Islam; instead, it portrays a young British Muslim who constructs her Islamic identity through books, sermons, and individual reflection in a secular town. This confirms Roy's view that modern forms of radical piety, re-Islamization and spiritual renewal are linked to deterritorialization and minority status rather than to any simple "import" of Middle Eastern traditions (Roy, 2004, p. ix). In this sense, the research objective of tracing how globalized, de-cultural Islam shapes identity in diaspora has been met.

Finally, the contrast between Shamshad and Kiran substantiates Malak's distinction between Muslims by culture and Muslims by practice (Malak, 2004). Shamshad, whose religiosity is tightly bound to family honour and cultural rules, is exposed as fragile and inconsistent. Kiran, however, moves from confusion to a position where she consciously chooses to be a practising Muslim, learning and performing the fundamentals of Islam out of conviction. The study therefore convincingly shows that re-Islamization in *You're Not Proper* is best understood as a shift from cultural to practising Muslim identity, and that this shift is structured by Islamophobia, secularism and globalization.

Taken together, these findings confirm that the research has achieved its purpose: it has demonstrated, with textual and theoretical support, that *You're Not Proper* offers a nuanced fictional case study of how second-generation Muslims in secular Europe undergo re-identification and re-Islamization in response to hostile environments, and how such processes complicate simplistic binaries of "integration" versus "radicalization."

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