Negotiating Faith and Identity in Kazim Ali's Select Poetry: A Coming-of-Age Perspective

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Abstract

The literary genre of coming-of-age has a long history and is primarily focused on the intricacies of identity formation, personal growth, and self-discovery. The current study explores, within this framework, the complex relationship between faith and identity in influencing life decisions as it is portrayed in Kazim Ali's poetry. Three key pieces—"Speech," "Autobiography," and "Home"—are highlighted in particular because they act as nucleuses for analysing the poet's exploration of existential desire, cultural estrangement, and spiritual reflectivity. The central research question enquires: In what ways do faith and identity shape the expression of individual and communal belonging in Kazim Ali's poetry? By using a qualitative research approach and careful textual analysis guided by the concepts of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this study enables a thorough investigation of the linguistic, cultural, and ideological structures present in Ali's poetry. According to the study, Ali views identity construction as a dynamic and ever-changing process that is influenced by the conflicts between personal memory, diasporic experience, and religious conviction. His poetry emphasises the discord between inherited traditions and personal initiative, demonstrating how religion can both stabilise and complicate one's identity. The findings highlight Ali's skilful employment of religious symbolism, multilingual expression, and philosophical exploration to convey the scrappy yet resilient voice of the diasporic individual. Utilising these poetic techniques, Ali examines and redefines the parameters of belonging, proposing that identity is not a static essence but rather a dynamic negotiation of location, language, and belief. This study ultimately enhances discussions regarding the intersections of spirituality, identity politics, and literary expression within contemporary diasporic literature.

1. Introduction

The coming-of-age genre discusses the transition of a person from adolescence to maturity, including self-discovery, identity formation, and growth. This literary and cinematic tradition amplifies across generations as it highlights the experience of personal and social transformations (Jones, 2020). The protagonist's journey often experiences hardships that facilitate growth, ultimately leading to a more profound understanding of self and society. Consequently, coming of age is an essential phase of human life, through physical, emotional, and cognitive developments that mould one's future (Erikson, 1968). Identity formation is central to the coming-of-age genre. Identity discusses one's unique traits, personality, and social positioning, modelled by the environment,

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genetics, and social, cultural, and personal experiences (Hall, 1996). It functions as a foundation for self-awareness and belonging, impacting how individuals connect to the world (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Recognising and embracing one's identity promotes a sense of purpose and direction, crucial for proceeding with a meaningful life (Marcia, 1980). Similarly, faith plays a significant role in identity formation, providing individuals a road map for understanding their existence. Further, it also includes spiritual practices, ethics, principles, and philosophical worldviews (Tillich, 1957). It offers a sense of peace during adversity, guiding individuals in making life decisions that align with their values (Smith & Denton, 2005). Faith influences emotional, psychological, social, cultural, and political affiliations, moulding one's worldview and inter- and intra-personal relationships (Geertz, 1973). By engaging in prayer, contemplation, or religious study offers individuals the opportunity to cultivate faith, reopening their sense of belonging within a community (Durkheim, 1912). Life decisions, whether minor or major, are decided by faith, identity, and societal expectations. Choosing a career, forming relationships, or making ethical choices often involves involves a negotiation between personal beliefs and external influences (Giddens, 1991). Family needs, social norms, economic conditions and political pressures can impact decision-making, yet individuals ultimately seek to align their choices with their principles and aspirations (Arnett, 2000). Interestingly, conscious reflection on personal values and principles leeas to fulfilling and meaningful choices in their life (Frankl, 1959).

The coming-of-age genre thus intersects with identity, faith, and social belonging, elaborating on how individuals negotiate their personal, social, cultural, and collective identities. Faith often dictates choices (to some extent), comfort, and the pursuit of life's purpose, strengthening the role of identity in deciding belonging (Taylor, 1989). Writers often explore these thematic aspects through personal narratives, embedding their faith and identity within their narratives (Said, 2000). Kazim Ali's poetry presents these dynamics, encompassing the complexities of faith, identity, and life choices. His poems highlight personal struggles, spiritual exploration and cultural displacement, framing the coming-of-age experience within broader socio-political contexts (Ali, 2016). By examining Ali's selected poetry, this study investigates how faith and identity mould personal and collective belonging, highlighting their role in life's transitional events.

2. Literature Review

Identity is a dynamic concept that includes personal, social, and cultural dimensions. Erikson (1968) popularised the concept of identity, focusing on its developmental nature and crises when designing self-conception. Tajfel and Turner (1979) introduced Social Identity Theory, showing how group associateship impacts self-perception and inter-group relations in society. Hall (1996) rightly argued that identity is a continuous process, built through discourse, particularly in postcolonial and diasporic contexts. Religious faith significantly influences personal and collective or group identity formation. Smith (2003) highlighted how religious beliefs design moral and social orientations, accentuating their role in identity consolidation. Asad (1993) criticises the Eurocentric definitions of religion, affirming that faith is deeply embedded in historical, political and social structures. Mahmood (2005) highlighted how religious practices promote the formation of subjectivity, especially in Muslim women's lives. Belonging is a critical aspect of identity negotiations, particularly for marginalised people. Yuval-Davis (2011) encompassed the politics of belonging, accentuating intersectionality and power dynamics in identity formations. Bhabha (1994) introduced the concept of the 'third space', where hybrid identities emerge in reaction to cultural displacement. Anthias (2006) criticised static notions of belonging, encouraging a translocational approach that considers multiple shifting identities. Several studies have examined how identity, faith, and belonging intertwine, particularly among diasporic and minority communities. Modood (2007) highlighted how Muslims in Britain negotiate religious and national identities. Gareau, et al. (2018) examined how young people conciliate religious faith with contemporary societal pressures. Vertovec (2009) introduced the concept of 'super-diversity' to explain the complex interactions of migration, ethnicity, and religion. While previous studies have highlighted identity, faith, and belonging, a significant gap remains in investigating these thematic aspects through the lens of contemporary poetry. Vetter (2019), in his work "The Violence of Translingual Identity in Kazim Ali's *Bright Felon: Autobiography and Cities* and Julia Alvarez's *The Other Side / El otro lado*", highlights poetry forms, styles, violence, and identity. He analysed how poetic expressions shape translingual identity, highlighting the fragmentary and nonlinear nature of poetry in shaping self-identity. However, his study primarily focuses on the violence of translingual identity, leaving a gap in understanding how identity, faith, and life choices intersect in Kazim Ali's poetry.

This study aspires to fill that gap by highlighting the negotiation of faith and identity in Kazim Ali's poetry: *Speech, Autobiography,* and *Home*. Through these poems, Ali portrays Muslim identity, religious faith, and

personal life choices, presenting insights into the negotiation of selfhood in poetic discourse. By focusing on these essences, this study will contribute to the broader discussion on identity, faith, and belonging, offering a fresh perspective within literary and cultural studies.

3. Theoretical Framework

For This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its principal theoretical and methodological orientation. CDA is not merely a tool for linguistic inquiry but a comprehensive framework that interrogates the socio-political dimensions embedded within language practices. As argued by Blommaert and Bulcaen (2000), CDA regards discourse as socially situated and shaped by cultural, historical, and ideological forces. It is particularly effective in analysing texts that engage with power asymmetries, identity formations, and socio-cultural transformations.

The analytical grounding of this study draws on Fairclough's (1992) model of CDA, which outlines a tripartite framework—textual analysis, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice—thus offering a robust mechanism for examining the relationship between language, ideology, and society. Fairclough's emphasis on discourse as both a product and a process positions language as central to the construction of social reality. The relevance of this framework is further underscored by Van Dijk (1993), who conceptualises discourse as a constitutive force that not only reflects but also structures social and ideological hierarchies. Blommaert and Bulcaen's (2000) contribution is particularly pertinent in this context, as their work situates CDA within a globalised and postcolonial paradigm, foregrounding its applicability to texts produced within transnational and diasporic spaces. Kazim Ali's poetry, marked by its engagement with themes of faith, identity, and displacement, offers a fertile site for such an inquiry.

While previous studies have approached Ali's poetry through thematic and autobiographical lenses, there exists a conspicuous gap in the application of CDA to his work—particularly in relation to the intersections of religious belief, cultural belonging, and identity formation. This research addresses that lacuna by applying CDA to selected poems by Kazim Ali, with an aim to understand how language mediates individual and collective identities within the framework of diasporic Muslim subjectivity. The study posits that CDA not only reveals the implicit power relations embedded in poetic language but also allows for a deeper understanding of how identity is negotiated through discourse.

4. Research Methodology

This research applies a critical discourse analysis approach to inspect the selected poems. Specifically, Foucault's (1972) CDA approach provides the theoretical foundation for highlighting identity, faith, and life choices in the poems. The primary analytical tool used in this study is vocabulary analysis, which allows for a detailed examination of the text's linguistic structures and thematic depth. Vocabulary is a fundamental element of language that conveys meaning, emotion, and ideology. Through CDA, the researchers examine key vocabulary choices, specific terminology, phrases, and collocations to show their cultural and ideological significance (Fairclough, 1995). Fairclough (1989) suggests that language use is inherently ideological, addressing broader social struggles. By applying vocabulary analysis, the study will highlight how Kazim Ali constructs textual meaning through synonyms, antonyms, hyponyms, and other lexical variations. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of how Muslim identity is moulded in Kazim Ali's poetry.

The rationale for selecting Kazim Ali's poems: "Speech" from *The Far Mosque*, "Autobiography" from *The Fortieth Day*, and "Home" from *Bright Felon*, is grounded in their thematic concentration and their collective ability to present key aspects of Ali's exploration of identity, faith, and personal transformation. While the publication dates of these poems span a formative period in Ali's literary career, their selection is not merely chronological but is driven by their shared thematic preoccupations and their ability to present a detailed understanding of the intersection between faith, identity, and belonging.

These poems were chosen because they collectively highlight a cohesive exploration of Ali's evolving association with the essence of self-discovery, spiritual inquiry, and the negotiation of personal and cultural boundaries. "Speech" highlights the complexities of communication and looks into meaning in a fragmented world, presenting Ali's preoccupation with the intersections of language and faith. "Autobiography" provides a deeply personal reflection on identity and the self, interrogating the ways in which individual experiences are moulded by broader cultural and spiritual contexts. Meanwhile, "Home" further extends these essences by examining the concept of belonging—both physical and metaphysical— and its relationship to transformation and identity. Together, these poems form a thematic triad that provides a specific period in Ali's poetic journey,

marked by a profound engagement with questions of selfhood, faith, and collective belonging. By applying Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this study unveils the implicit meanings and ideological underpinnings within these poems, addressing the research question: How do faith and identity influence personal and collective belonging in Kazim Ali's poetry?

5. Analysis

Firstly, in the poem "Speech", Kazim Ali highlights the intersection of faith, identity, and the struggle for belonging through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Social Identity Theory. Through imagery and layered metaphors, Ali deals with the complexities of religious iconography, linguistic barriers and personal history, highlighting the tension between belief and self-perception. As part of a coming-of-age genre, the poem addresses the speaker's evolving understanding of selfhood, spirituality, and language. By examining the ways in which Ali builds identity politically and socially, this analysis displays how his poetry negotiates cultural multiplicities and the tensions that arise from such navigation.

Stuart Hall and Henri Tajfel's social identity theory provides an essential framework for understanding the conflicts within Ali's poetry. Hall's notion of identity as a "production" rather than a fixed element (Hall, 1996) reverberates with Ali's representation of selfhood, while Tajfel's emphasis on in-group and out-group dynamics (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) highlights the struggles of belonging in multiple cultural and religious spaces. By structuring the discussion around thematic essences like redemption, exile, and identity crisis, the text offers a critical interpretation of the poem's intricate discourse.

The poem opens with the evocative image: "*How struck I was by that face, years ago, in the church mural: / Eve, being led by Christ through the broken gates of Hell*" (Ali, 2005, lines 1-2). This depiction situates the reader within a religious and historical discourse, invoking the Christian concept of redemption. Eve's presence, generally associated with sin and exile, initiates a meditation on forgiveness and belonging. The phrase "broken gates of Hell" highlights its thematic significance in terms of redemption and exile. The phrase carries a duality of meaning, showing both destruction and liberation—while the breaking of Hell's gates may symbolise an escape from damnation, it also shows a moment of upheaval that defies traditional religious structures. This imagery recalls Christian eschatology, especially notions of salvation, divine justice, and the fall of humanity. The identification with Eve aligns with narratives of original sin, exile from Eden, and the hope for redemption, signifying a cyclical tension between loss and renewal. Further, the phrase evokes the symbolism of barriers and transgression, implying the crossing of spiritual, physical, or ideological boundaries. The breaking of Hell's gates indicates a rupture in established doctrines, aligning with broader essences of doubt, faith, and self-reclamation. By positioning the speaker in relation to Eve, the poem also gestures toward personal displacement, possibly showing the poet's own struggles with identity, faith, and belonging. The linguistic choice indicates a confrontation with inherited belief systems and an attempt to shape a new spiritual and self-affirming path, adding depth to the poem's exposition of redemption and exile.

Institutionalised faith and social hierarchies are critiqued in the lines, "*She's been nominated for the position of Featured Saint / on the Icon of Belief*" (Ali, 2005, lines 3-4). The irony embedded in the word "nomination" emphasises how religious legitimacy is socially built and contested. The speaker juxtaposes Eve's prospective sainthood with their own marginalised status, highlighted by the phrase "dark horse candidate" (Ali, 2005, line 5). The term "dark horse" signifies both exclusion and the struggle for recognition, a reflection of the broader identity crisis that permeates the poem. Ali further highlights this crisis through personal recollection: "*Me: fever-ridden and delirious, a child in Vellore, unfolding the packet around my neck that I was ordered not to open*" (Ali, 2005, lines 6-7). This moment capsulises the tension between self-discovery and obedience, as well as the conflict between imposed identity and personal status. The location, Vellore, a city in Tamil Nadu, introduces a postcolonial dimension, showing the intersections of linguistic, religious, and cultural influences. The unreadable letters within the packet become a central motif of linguistic and cultural alienation: "*Inside, a folk cure, painted delicately in saffron / Letters that I could not read.*" (Ali, 2005, lines 8-9). The saffron colour, associated with Hinduism and nationalism, contrasts with the Christian imagery of the opening lines, showing the persona's negotiation of hybrid identities. The unreadable letters symbolise both a yearning for comprehension and the barriers that language builds in the process of belonging.

The poem reaches a pivotal question: "Why do I feel qualified for the position?" Based on letters I could not read, it amounts to this: (Ali, 2005, lines 10-11). Here, Ali epitomises the paradox of identity formation: can one belong to a faith, culture, or ideology that remains partially inaccessible? The dilemma strengthens in the lines: "*Neither you nor I can pronounce the difference between the broken gates and the forbidden letters.*" (Ali,

2005, lines 12-13). The poet Ali, by equating theological exclusion with linguistic barriers, highlights the social construction of both faith and language, which shapes and limits individual identity. The imperative "*Recite to me, please, all the letters you are not able to read*" (Ali, 2005, line 18) signifies the paradox of articulation and identity. How does one express an existence that remains elusive? The rhetorical structure seized the reader in the speaker's crisis, positioning faith as both an act of presence and absence. The final plea, "*Spell 'fling yourself skyward.' / Spell 'fever'*" (Ali, 2005, lines 19-20), signifies the spiritual longing at the heart of the poem. 'Skyward' signifies transcendence, while 'fever' recalls the earlier dementia, showing the duality between enlightenment and suffering.

However, Kazim Ali's "Speech" is a meditation on faith, identity, and belonging, structured as a journey through religious iconography, linguistic complexity and personal history. The poem embodies Hall's assertion that identity is a continuous process of negotiation rather than a fixed essence (Hall, 1996). Tajfel's concept of social categorisation, which shapes identity through ongoing tensions between self-perception and societal expectations (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), is also evident in this poem. By intersecting Christian and Hindu elements, the motif of unreadable letters, and the imperative voice, Ali highlights a discourse of struggle and self-exploration. As Fairclough (1995) argues, texts do not merely show reality but actively construct it. Ali's poem exemplifies this concept by unveiling how language mediates faith and selfhood, questioning the very structures that define belonging. Thus, the poem "Speech" invites readers to reconsider the intersections of identity, belief, and language, compelling them to acknowledge the complexities of cultural negotiation.

Ali's poem "Autobiography" (2008) highlights the essence of faith, identity, and the struggle for belonging within the coming-of-age genre. The fragmented structure and minimalist diction emphasise the internal conflict between cultural dislocation and self-discovery. Ali's use of curtained lines and surprising shifts in subjectivity shows a fractured self-struggling to build a constructive identity. The opening lines "*We didn't really speak / My summer wants to answer*" (Ali, 2008, lines 1-2) establish a tone of silence and longing, showing the poet's struggle with communication and, further, a loss of cultural or religious voice. From a CDA perspective, linguistic omissions suggest suppressed identities or unspoken histories (Fairclough, 1995). The personification of 'summer' as a transitional phase shows the dynamicity of youth, indicating a longing to make sense of inherited beliefs. This aligns with Hall's notion of identity as a continuous process rather than a fixed essence (Hall, 1996).

The second stanza, "*the architecture doesn't matter — this is not my real life*" (Ali, 2008, lines 3-4), dismantles conventional markers of belonging. In this context, 'architecture' signifies structured, physical, and ideological foundations, for instance, familial expectation, religion, or nationality (Wodak, 2001). The assertion that "this is not my real life" indicates existential alienation, where inherited traditions may no longer align with personal experiences. According to Tajfel's Social Identity Theory, identity is moulded through group affiliation and differentiation (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Ali's rejection of traditional structures shows an internal conflict between imposed self-actualization and individual identity.

Ali further questions belief systems and the burden of faith through lines such as "*When I am here, I want to know: Why do I believe what I was taught?*" (Ali, 2008, lines 5-6). This moment epitomises the coming-of-age struggle, where questioning inherited doctrines is central to identity formation (Erikson, 1968). The phrase "when I am here" suggests spatial and temporal disorientation, stiffening the idea that faith and identity are fortuitous depending on place and time. Ali's introspection re-echoes with postcolonial struggles of diasporic subjects, who navigate between tradition and personal agency. The existential rupture in "*Why do I believe what I was taught*" shows a shift from passive acceptance to active interrogation, aligning with Hall's assertion that identity is always in process and built through discourse. Further, the poet presents the storm as a symbol of transformation and conflict, as seen in the lines "*a storm is on the way / close all the windows.*" In CDA, storms often signify upheaval and change. The directive to "close all the windows" highlights both restriction and protection, reflecting societal and familial pressures to conform. This imagery metaphorically represents external forces that challenge beliefs, signifying the turbulence of self-exploration. In a Bildungsroman framework, such conflicts function as necessary trials for protagonists to rebuild their identities (Bakhtin, 1981).

The concluding lines "*begin at the earliest hour / are there a self*" (Ali, 2008, lines 5-6), signify the cyclical nature of self-discovery. "*Begin at the earliest hour*" suggests a return to origins, hinting that identity must be rebuilt from foundational experiences. The existential query, "Is there a self?" disrupts notions of stable identity, reechoing with postmodern theories of fragmented subjectivity (Lacan, 1977). Ali's poetry aligns with Derrida's concept of différance, where meaning and identity remain in a constant state of deferral (Derrida, 1978). Additionally, Tajfel's distinction between social identity and personal identity is evident in Ali's navigation of conflicting cultural bonds.

However, Kazim Ali's "Autobiography" intersects faith, identity, and belonging within the coming-of-age narrative. His sparse yet evocative diction, fragmented syntax, and shifting subjectivity signify the liminality of selfhood. Ali presents faith as both an inherited construct and a site of personal negotiation. The poem's progression from silent reflection to existential questioning epitomises the broader struggle of individuals navigating social, religious, cultural, and ideological beliefs. Thus, the poem unveils how Ali's poetic language not only reflects but also actively shapes the contested and dynamic nature of identity formation.

Kazim Ali's poem "Home" is a profound meditation on faith, identity, and the struggles of belonging within cultural and religious structures. Ali's poetry is associated deeply with religious discourse, using theological debates to construct and interrogate identity. The reference to the Sunni and Shia explanation of Prophet Mohammad's purity in the poem "Home" displays broader sectarian tensions that mould personal and collective religious identity. By incorporating these differing perspectives, Ali not only acknowledges the historical schisms within Islam but also positions religious identity as dynamic rather than static. His reference, "*The Sunni Muslims have a story in which the angels cast a dark mark out of Prophet Mohammad's heart, thus making him pure, though the Shi'a reject this story, believing in his absolute innocence from birth*" (Ali, 2009, lines 6-8), operates as an intertextual critique of hegemonic narratives. Drawing on Stuart Hall's notion that identity is a "positioning" within cultural and historical discourses (Hall, 1996), Ali problematises religious fundamentalism. His poetry resists fixed categorisation, instead portraying religious identity as a site of ongoing negotiation and reinterpretation. By collocating Sunni and Shia narratives, Ali explores the constructed nature of sectarian divisions, encountering the authority of any singular interpretation. This critical engagement with religious discourse shows how theological disputes are not merely doctrinal but deeply associated with sociopolitical power structures. Moreover, the implications of these religious disputes extend beyond theological debates; they mould Ali's personal sense of belonging. The sectarian divide, embedded in historical conflicts, informs his poetic consciousness, complicating his relationship with his religious heritage. His engagement with these theological differences accentuates the ways in which faith and identity intersect, making his poetry a space for both critique and self-exploration. In this light, the poem "Home" is not just a reflection of religious schisms but an act of intellectual resistance. Ali's poetry breaks rigid dogmas, allowing for a pluralistic understanding of faith. His approach implies that religious identity, much like cultural identity, is historically contingent and subject to reanalysis rather than being an immutable essence.

The poet's intertextual strategy expands beyond Islamic traditions, incorporating texts such as *the Qur'an, Injeel, Tavrat, Zubuur, Bhagavad Gita, and the Popul Vuh*: "There are a hundred others - *Bhagavad-Gita, Lotus Sutra, / Song of Myself, the Gospel of Magdalene, Popul Vuh*, the book of Black Buffalo / Woman - somewhere unrevealed as such" (Ali, 2009, lines 60-64). This interweaving of multiple religious traditions builds a universalist framework of faith, challenging hegemonic discourses of exclusivity and aligning with Hall's claim that identities are always relational and constituted through difference. Ali's linguistic displacement is another site of identity conflict, aligning with Henri Tajfel's theory of social identity, which rightly posits that individuals acquire a sense of self from group membership (Tajfel, 1979). His struggle with Arabic, the language of Islamic scripture, displays the gaps in cultural transmission: "*I learnt to pronounce my daily prayers from transliterated English in a book called 'Know Your Islam', dark blue with gold calligraphed writing that made the English appear as if it were Arabic*" (Ali, 2009, lines 27-29). This moment epitomises the alienation inherent in religious and cultural assimilation, displaying tension between inherited identities and linguistic isolation.

Similarly, Ali's pilgrimage to Hyderabad's Maula Ali shrine epitomises a quest for rootedness: "*In Hyderabad, I prayed every part of the day, climbed a thousand steps to the site of Maula Ali's pilgrimage*" (Ali, 2009, lines 24-25). This journey is not merely spiritual but symbolic of his search for belonging within a historical and religious lineage. The physical ascent reflects the internal struggle of reconciling inherited traditional faith with lived experience, aligning with Hall's argument that cultural identity is both a matter of "being" and "becoming.

Family traditions further highlight Ali's negotiation of identity. His father's act of combing his hair functions as a metaphor for cultural grooming: "*Still the feeling of his rough hand, gently cupping my cheek, dipping the steel comb in water to comb my hair flat*" (Ali, 2009, line 44). However, this act of care is mixed with the belated realisation of his natural curliness: "*I never knew my hair was wavy until I was nearly twenty-two*" (Ali, 2009, line 45). The motif of hair symbolises the slow process of unlearning societal expectations and embracing self-authenticity, reinforcing Tajfel's theory that identity is moulded through social categorisation and differentiation.

Ali's mother, too, plays a crucial role in his identity formation. Her ritual of holding *the Qur'an* over his head during departure signifies both protection and the inevitable rupture from familial and religious origins: "*Each time I left home, including the last time, my mother would hold a Quran up for me to walk under. Once under, one would turn and kiss the book*" (Ali, 2009, lines 54-55). This act captures the paradox of home as both a sanctuary and a site of departure, mirroring the diasporic condition of longing and loss.

The poem also captivates queerness within Islamic orthodoxy, challenging the interpretative frameworks that have historically marginalised LGBTQ+ individuals. Ali critiques the use of hadith to justify persecution, as evident in the poem: "*There is no place in the Quran which requires acts of homosexuality to be punishable by lashings and death*" (Ali, 2009, line 56). Ali's rhetorical juxtaposition, "Hadith or scripture," highlights this point. Scripture or rupture" foregrounds a crisis of authority, questioning whether religious texts serve as instruments of inclusion or exclusion. This engagement with queer discourse emphasises the idea that identity is not singular but intersectional, shaped by overlapping structures of power and resistance. The overarching metaphor of the blanket from the "*Story of the Blanket*" epitomises Ali's struggle for acceptance: "*Is that me at the edge of the blanket, asking to be allowed inside?*" (Ali, 2009, line 22). The blanket, originally symbolising divine love and chosen kinship, transforms into a contested space where the poet's identity is scrutinised and potentially excluded. This moment stiffens the tension between belonging and marginalization— a recurring theme in diasporic and queer narratives.

Ali's name itself becomes a metaphor for resilience: "*My name is Kazim. The name Kazim signifies patience. I know how to wait*" (Ali, 2009, line 80). This final assertion redefines patience not as passive endurance, but as an active process of self-formation. This aligns with Hall's argument that cultural identity is "*never complete, always in process*". Through an intricate interplay of language, memory, and faith, Ali establishes an identity that resists fixed definitions, embracing ambiguity and self-acceptance. Thus, Ali's poetry probes power structures and negotiates identity through language. His poetry becomes a dynamic site of contestation, where religious, cultural, and sexual identities intersect, clash, and ultimately find expression through self-acceptance.

6. Discussion and Findings

Kazim Ali's poetry highlights the complexities of faith, identity, and belonging, positioning his work within broader discourses of cultural hybridity and religious negotiation. This study critically examines how Ali unveils the essence of identity through language, religious imagery, and personal memory. The findings of this analysis are structured around three primary thematic essences: redemption, exile, and identity crisis.

6.1. Redemption and the Dynamicity of Faith

Ali's poem "Speech" provides a deep meditation on redemption, especially through religious iconography. The opening lines—"How struck I was by that face, years ago, in the church mural: Eve, being led by Christ through the broken gates of Hell"—situate the reader within a theological discourse, invoking Christian eschatology and its implications for salvation. The presence of Eve, historically linked with sin and exile, indicates a layered engagement with notions of forgiveness and spiritual renewal. This interconnection between sin and salvation aligns with Stuart Hall's argument that identity is a continuous process of negotiation rather than a fixed element (Hall, 1996). The imagery of 'broken gates' epitomises a duality – while presenting liberation from condemnation, it simultaneously encounters doctrinal rigidity, indicating the possibility of alternative interpretations of faith. The poem, therefore, positions redemption not as a preordained state but as a construct shaped by personal and collective experiences. The ironic reference to Eve's 'nomination' for sainthood, which signifies the social construction of religious legitimacy, further evidences Ali's association with established religion. The speaker's marginalised status, accentuated through the phrase *"dark horse candidate,"* stiffens the tension between exclusion and recognition, mirroring broader struggles of identity formation. By questioning religious fundamentalism, Ali aligns his poetry with Hall's notion that identity is constructed through discourse, encountering hegemonic narratives and advocating for a dynamic understanding of faith.

6.2. Exile and Cultural Displacement

Ali's poetry frequently probes the experience of exile, both literal and metaphorical, epitomising the complexities of belonging within hybrid cultural and religious spaces. The poem "Speech" introduces a moment of personal alienation: "I am fever-ridden and delirious, a child in Vellore, unfolding the packet around my neck that I was ordered not to open." Here, the setting of Vellore—a historically significant postcolonial space—emphasizes the intersections of religious, linguistic, and cultural dislocation. The 'unreadable letters' inside the packet become a

central motif, showing linguistic alienation and the barriers that language constructs in the process of self-identification. The use of "saffron," a colour deeply tied to Hinduism and nationalism, contrasts with the Christian imagery in the opening lines, mirroring the poet's struggle to negotiate multiple religious and cultural affiliations. This aligns with Tajfel and Turner's (1979) theory of in-group and out-group dynamics, wherein identity is moulded through processes of inclusion and exclusion. Ali's poem "Home" extends this question of exile by engaging with sectarian religious differences, especially between Sunni and Shia interpretations of Islamic history. The lines "*The Sunni Muslims have a story in which the angels cast a dark mark out of Prophet Mohammad's heart, thus making him pure, though the Shi'a reject this story, believing in his absolute innocence from birth*" show the ways in which theological debates mould collective and personal religious identity. Ali's juxtaposition of these narratives combats fixed categorisations, positioning religious identity as an evolving process rather than an immutable essence.

6.3. Identity Crisis and the Role of Language

Ali's poetry highlights the paradox of identity formation, especially the tensions between imposed identities and self-actualisation. The existential question posed in "Speech"—"Why do I feel qualified for the position?" based on letters I could not read—amounts to the previous point and emphasises the dilemma of belonging to a faith or culture that remains partially inaccessible. This re-echoes with Fairclough's (1995) assertion that texts do not merely reflect reality but actively construct it. By equating theological exclusion with linguistic barriers, Ali highlights that faith and language are socially mediated structures that shape individual self-perception. The imperative, "*Recite to me, please, all the letters you cannot read,*" encompasses the struggle of articulation, positioning identity as a dynamic space where meaning is simultaneously sought and withheld. This rhetorical structure invites the reader into the speaker's crisis, highlighting faith as a balance between presence and absence. The final plea, "Spell 'fling yourself skyward.' / Spell 'fever'", mixes transcendence and suffering, encompassing the duality of enlightenment and existential despair.

Similarly, in the poem "Autobiography," Ali highlights belief systems through minimalist diction and fragmented syntax. The lines, "*When I am here, I want to know—Why do I believe what I was taught?*" epitomise the coming-of-age struggle, wherein questioning inherited doctrines becomes central to identity formation, which aligns with diasporic struggles of self-definition, where subjects navigate the tensions between tradition and personal agency. The storm metaphor in "*A Storm Is on the Way*"/"*Close All the Windows*" reinforces societal pressures to conform. The directive to "close all the windows" represents restriction and protection, reflecting familial and institutional efforts to contain ideological exploration. This image aligns with Bakhtin's (1981) concept of the Bildungsroman, wherein protagonists undergo trials that force them to reconstruct their self-identities.

7. Conclusion

Kazim Ali's poetry provides a rich and detailed exploration of faith, identity, and belonging, situating it within the broader discourse of diasporic literature and cultural hybridity. Through the application of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Social Identity Theory, this study has highlighted how Ali builds identity through language, religious imagery, and personal memory. The findings, structured around the essences of redemption, exile, and identity crisis, unveil the poet's profound engagement with the complexities of negotiating faith and identity in a diasporic context. However, while these findings are significant, they also invite a deeper critical discussion on how Ali's work contributes to contemporary literary debates, particularly within the field of diasporic literature.

Ali's exploration of redemption, as seen in the poem "Speech", challenges traditional religious narratives by highlighting salvation as a dynamic and negotiated process rather than a fixed doctrine. This aligns with Stuart Hall's (1996) postulation that identity is a continuous process of negotiation, mirroring the broader diasporic experience of navigating multiple cultural and religious affiliations. By questioning religious fundamentalism and advocating for a more inclusive understanding of faith, Ali's poetry reechoes with the struggles of diasporic communities to reconcile their inherited traditions with the realities of their lived experiences. This contribution is particularly significant in the context of contemporary diasporic literature, which often scaffolds the tension between preserving cultural heritage and adapting to new social environments.

The essence of exile in Ali's poetry further emphasises the complexities of belonging in hybrid cultural and religious spaces. Poems like "Speech" and "Home" explore the linguistic and cultural barriers that diasporic individuals face, as well as the ways in which these barriers mould their sense of identity. Ali's use of religious and cultural symbols, such as saffron and Christian iconography, shows the multifaceted nature of diasporic

identity, which is often moulded by processes of inclusion and exclusion (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This exploration of exile not only strengthens our understanding of Ali's personal experiences but also contributes to broader academic discussions on the diasporic condition, especially the ways in which people negotiate their identities in the face of religious and cultural dislocation.

Ali's inquisition of identity crisis, especially through the lens of language, further enriches our understanding of the diasporic experience. The existential questions posed in "Speech" and "Autobiography" mirror the struggles of individuals who feel alienated from their cultural and religious heritage, yet are compelled to find meaning within it. This aligns with Fairclough's (1995) assertion that language and discourse actively construct reality, indicating that identity is not merely inherited but is continually moulded through social and linguistic interactions. By excavating the role of language in identity formation, Ali's poetry contributes to ongoing debates in diasporic literature about the ways in which language mediates the experience of belonging and alienation.

Besides, Kazim Ali's poetry provides a compelling lens through which to examine the complexities of faith, identity, and belonging in the diasporic context. His poetry encounters traditional religious and cultural narratives and provides a detailed understanding of the diasporic experience, especially the ways individuals negotiate their identities in the face of cultural hybridity and dislocation. By connecting with wider academic talks about cultural mixing, religious adaptation, and how identities are formed, Ali's poetry enhances our understanding of modern diasporic literature and its relevance to the real lives of diasporic communities.

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The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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