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MARKEDNESS, DIASPORIC IDENTITY, AND BELONGING: URDU-ENGLISH CODE-SWITCHING IN H. M. NAQVI'S HOME BOY

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Abstract

This paper examines Urdu-English code-switching in H. M. Naqvi's Home Boy (2009) as a mechanism through which Pakistani diasporic characters negotiate identity, belonging, and social risk. It is extracted and reorganized from a qualitative thesis based on textual sociolinguistic analysis and Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model. The analysis distinguishes unmarked, marked, and exploratory code choices. Unmarked Urdu use in intimate and in-group contexts sustains cultural continuity and a stable Pakistani diasporic identity. Marked switching becomes visible during emotional pressure, surveillance, institutional constraint, or relational disruption, enabling characters to regulate vulnerability, create distance, or reassert culturally grounded identities. Exploratory switching is particularly important in unfamiliar, public, institutional, and mixed-audience settings, where speakers are uncertain about the appropriate rights-and-obligations set. The findings indicate that diasporic identity is not represented as fixed; instead, it is negotiated through changing linguistic choices in response to social context, emotional state, and perceived risk. The paper concludes that code-switching operates as a linguistic strategy of identity maintenance, adaptation, and real-time negotiation

1. INTRODUCTION

Diasporic identity is not a fixed or singular identity but is continuously shaped through movement between cultural, linguistic, geographical, and social environments. For diasporic individuals, belonging often involves negotiating connections to a homeland while simultaneously responding to the cultural expectations, institutional structures, and social norms of the host society. H. M. Naqvi's *Home Boy* represents this complexity through Pakistani characters living in New York in the aftermath of 9/11, a period marked by heightened surveillance, racialization, suspicion, alienation, and social uncertainty. Within this context, language becomes more than a neutral vehicle for communication; it becomes an important

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resource through which characters position themselves in relation to Pakistani cultural identity, American society, and the interpersonal expectations governing their relationships.

Urdu-English code-switching is particularly significant because the two linguistic resources operate within overlapping but culturally distinct domains. Urdu may evoke cultural familiarity, shared history, familial associations, humor, solidarity, and emotional affiliation, whereas English is closely associated with the dominant linguistic environment of New York and with broader processes of social and professional interaction. However, these associations are not fixed. Their meanings depend on the participants, interactional context, topic, emotional state, and existing relationship between speakers. Consequently, code-switching in *Home Boy* can be understood as a flexible practice through which characters negotiate both cultural continuity and adaptation to their diasporic environment.

The source thesis identifies three major patterns of code choice in the novel: **unmarked, marked, and exploratory choices**. Unmarked choices occur when the selected language or linguistic variety corresponds with the expected social relationship and therefore reinforces familiarity, solidarity, and cultural continuity. In the context of *Home Boy*, unmarked Urdu-English switching can help maintain connections to Pakistani cultural identity even when characters are physically distant from Pakistan. Such switching allows culturally meaningful expressions and interactional practices to remain present within an English-dominant environment, thereby transforming language into a resource for maintaining a sense of social and cultural belonging.

By contrast, marked choices become significant when the selected linguistic form departs from the expected relational or social pattern. Such departures may emerge during emotional pressure, interpersonal conflict, fear, vulnerability, discrimination, or uncertainty. From the perspective of Myers-Scotton's (1993) Markedness Model, a marked choice can signal that the speaker is challenging, redefining, or renegotiating the existing rights-and-obligations relationship. In *Home Boy*, therefore, marked switching can be interpreted not simply as a linguistic change but as an indication of identity stress. When characters experience tension between their Pakistani affiliations and the expectations of their American surroundings, their language choices may reveal uncertainty about how they should present themselves, relate to others, or understand their own position within the host society.

The third category, exploratory code choice, is particularly relevant to diasporic belonging because it represents situations in which social expectations are unclear or unstable. Characters may use language tentatively to assess the interactional environment, determine the degree of cultural familiarity shared with another person, or establish whether a particular identity position will be accepted. Exploratory switching therefore reflects the uncertainty that can accompany diasporic encounters. Rather than immediately committing to either cultural familiarity or assimilation, speakers can use language to test interpersonal boundaries and discover appropriate ways of participating in a particular social environment.

These three forms of code choice collectively demonstrate that identity in *Home Boy* is constructed through ongoing linguistic negotiation. Unmarked switching supports continuity and reinforces connections to Pakistani identity; marked switching exposes moments of identity tension and relational disruption; and **exploratory switching** reflects the process of testing and negotiating belonging in socially uncertain situations. This distinction is important because it prevents bilingualism from being treated as a simple opposition between Pakistani and American identities. Instead, the characters' linguistic practices reveal identities that are fluid, relational, and context-dependent.

Accordingly, this paper focuses specifically on the identity implications of Urdu-English code-

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switching in *Home Boy*. It examines how unmarked switching sustains Pakistani cultural identity and interpersonal affiliation, how marked choices reveal psychological and social pressures associated with diasporic positioning, and how exploratory switching enables characters to negotiate belonging when established cultural and social norms become uncertain. Through this perspective, code-switching emerges as a central mechanism through which diasporic identity is performed, maintained, challenged, and renegotiated within the multicultural and post-9/11 environment represented in the novel.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Urdu-English code-switching has received considerable attention within research on Pakistani bilingualism, language contact, identity construction, and sociolinguistic practice. In Pakistan, English and Urdu occupy historically and socially differentiated but overlapping domains. English has traditionally been associated with higher education, institutional authority, professional communication, socioeconomic mobility, and formal or public discourse, whereas Urdu functions more strongly as a language of national and cultural affiliation and is frequently associated with interpersonal familiarity and everyday interaction (Rahman, 2002, 2010). These functional distinctions, however, are not absolute. Contemporary Pakistani bilingual speakers routinely move between English and Urdu according to topic, audience, relationship, setting, and communicative purpose. Code-switching therefore represents not simply linguistic alternation but a socially meaningful practice through which speakers negotiate identity, power, solidarity, and interpersonal relationships.

Studies of Pakistani English and Urdu-English bilingualism further suggest that switching between the two languages can index cultural affiliation and social positioning. Zainab et al. (2024), for example, demonstrate that Urdu-English code-switching in Pakistani English reflects broader communicative and identity-related dynamics rather than merely deficiencies in proficiency. Similarly, research on bilingual Pakistani students indicates that code-switching can be influenced by cultural identity, peer relationships, linguistic competence, social expectations, and the communicative environment (Zia et al., 2024). These findings are particularly relevant to literary representations of bilingualism because they demonstrate that the social meaning of a language choice emerges from its interactional context rather than from the language itself.

Within diasporic literature, language frequently becomes an important mechanism for representing displacement, cultural memory, belonging, and identity negotiation. Diasporic subjects occupy social spaces in which inherited cultural practices encounter new linguistic and institutional environments. As a result, bilingual language practices can simultaneously maintain connections with the homeland and facilitate participation in the host society. In *Home Boy*, this tension is particularly significant because the Pakistani characters inhabit New York while remaining connected to Pakistani cultural and linguistic identities. Their movement between Urdu and English consequently reflects the broader experience of negotiating belonging between multiple cultural locations.

The representation of bilingualism in *Home Boy* is also situated within the sociopolitical conditions of post-9/11 America. The characters encounter racialization, surveillance, suspicion, displacement, and uncertainty, making questions of identity and belonging particularly consequential. Previous scholarship on the novel has emphasized its treatment of multicultural conflict, Pakistani-American identity, post-9/11 discrimination, and the experiences of racialized Muslim and Pakistani subjects (Aziz & Nadeem, 2024; Mehta, 2025). From this perspective, language can be interpreted as one of the resources through which characters respond to social pressures and construct positions in

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relation to both Pakistani cultural affiliation and American social environments.

Theoretical Framework: Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model

The principal theoretical framework for this study is Myers-Scotton's (1993) Markedness Model, which conceptualizes code choice as a socially motivated process. Rather than viewing speakers as selecting languages randomly or exclusively according to linguistic competence, the model proposes that language choices are connected to relationships between participants and to the socially recognized expectations governing those relationships. These expectations are conceptualized through **rights-and-obligations (RO) sets**, which represent the behaviors and relational expectations considered appropriate within a particular interaction.

Within this framework, an unmarked choice occurs when speakers select the linguistic code normally associated with the existing relationship and interactional context. Such a choice confirms the expected RO set and consequently reinforces social stability. In *Home Boy*, unmarked Urdu-English switching can therefore be interpreted as a representation of familiarity, cultural continuity, solidarity, and interpersonal intimacy when it corresponds to the established relationship between characters. Urdu expressions embedded naturally within predominantly English discourse may signal that speakers recognize and maintain a shared cultural and relational space.

A marked choice, in contrast, occurs when a speaker deliberately or meaningfully departs from the expected linguistic pattern. Such a departure may signal a change in social positioning, emotional stance, interpersonal distance, or relational expectations. Markedness is therefore not inherently negative; rather, its significance derives from the contrast between the expected and selected codes. In the context of *Home Boy*, a marked switch may become meaningful during conflict, emotional pressure, vulnerability, fear, confrontation, or moments when characters reconsider how they wish to position themselves toward others. Such choices can consequently reveal tensions between cultural identity, social expectations, and personal experience.

The present study also incorporates exploratory code choice as an interpretive category. Exploratory switching is particularly useful for analyzing diasporic interactions because characters may encounter situations in which the appropriate RO set is uncertain. A speaker may therefore shift provisionally between English and Urdu to assess the degree of cultural familiarity, solidarity, acceptance, or social distance available in an interaction. Rather than simply expressing an already established identity, exploratory switching can function as a means of testing the social environment and adjusting one's linguistic behavior in response to interactional feedback.

The distinction among unmarked, marked, and exploratory choices provides a useful framework for examining identity as a dynamic rather than fixed phenomenon. Unmarked choices may reproduce established cultural and relational affiliations; **marked choices** may expose identity tension or challenge existing social expectations; and **exploratory choices** may represent attempts to discover an appropriate social position in uncertain environments. This tripartite perspective is particularly relevant to diasporic characters because their social identities are constructed across overlapping cultural and linguistic spaces.

Code-Switching, Identity, and Belonging in Home Boy

The application of the Markedness Model to *Home Boy* allows language choice to be connected directly with the novel's representation of diasporic identity. The characters do not simply alternate between Urdu and English as two equivalent linguistic systems. Rather, their switching can represent different orientations toward cultural familiarity, public identity, interpersonal relationships, and social risk. Urdu can provide access to a culturally familiar interactional space, while English can facilitate

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participation in the dominant linguistic environment. However, these functions remain context-dependent, and neither language should be treated as inherently intimate, formal, marked, or unmarked.

This contextual approach is important because diasporic identity involves continuous negotiation rather than a simple choice between homeland and host culture. A character may use Urdu to reinforce cultural affiliation in one interaction but rely primarily on English in another to achieve social alignment or avoid unwanted attention. The same bilingual repertoire can therefore support different identity positions depending on the social circumstances. In *Home Boy*, this flexibility becomes especially significant because cultural expression occurs within an environment shaped by post-9/11 racial and political pressures.

The emotional dimension of bilingualism further strengthens this interpretation. Research on multilingualism suggests that different languages may become associated with particular emotional experiences, social relationships, memories, and cultural contexts (Pavlenko, 2005). More recent research also indicates that emotional states can influence bilingual language control and switching behavior (Jiang et al., 2024). Accordingly, Urdu-English switching in *Home Boy* can be examined not only as an identity marker but also as a resource for expressing emotional positioning. A shift toward culturally familiar Urdu may reinforce comfort and solidarity, while a departure from an established linguistic pattern may communicate emotional pressure, interpersonal tension, or changing relational expectations.

Thus, the linguistic movement between Urdu and English becomes evidence of **situational identity negotiation**. The characters' bilingual practices reveal how diasporic subjects simultaneously preserve cultural affiliations, adapt to the host environment, manage interpersonal relationships, and respond to social uncertainty. Through Myers-Scotton's framework, code-switching can consequently be understood as a form of social action through which characters reproduce, challenge, and renegotiate their identities and relationships.

Overall, the literature and theoretical framework establish that Urdu-English code-switching in *Home Boy* should be interpreted as a socially and contextually meaningful practice. The combination of Pakistani bilingualism, diasporic literary studies, and the Markedness Model provides a framework for examining how linguistic choices contribute to cultural continuity, identity stress, belonging, interpersonal solidarity, and relational renegotiation. The present study builds on this scholarship by focusing specifically on how unmarked, marked, and exploratory code choices participate in the construction of diasporic identity and belonging in Naqvi's novel.

3. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative textual sociolinguistic approach consistent with the methodology employed in the source thesis. The analysis focuses on selected dialogues and narrative passages from H. M. Naqvi's *Home Boy* (2009) that contain instances of Urdu-English code-switching. Rather than treating code-switching as an isolated linguistic phenomenon, each selected passage is examined within its immediate narrative, interpersonal, cultural, and social context. Particular attention is given to passages in which language choice becomes relevant to the construction or negotiation of identity, cultural belonging, emotional positioning, and social relationships.

The selection of textual data is purposive rather than exhaustive. Passages are selected because they provide meaningful evidence of linguistic choices associated with identity and belonging, including interactions involving emotional pressure, unfamiliar interlocutors, institutional settings, public spaces, mixed audiences, cultural encounters, and situations in which characters experience uncertainty about their social positioning. This approach allows the study to concentrate on linguistically and socially

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significant instances rather than attempting to quantify every occurrence of Urdu-English switching in the novel.

Each selected instance is analyzed according to several interconnected dimensions: direction of switching, markedness category, emotional orientation, relational or kinship effect, and identity implication. The direction of switching considers movement between Urdu and English, while the markedness analysis distinguishes between unmarked, marked, and exploratory choices. Emotional orientation considers whether a particular choice contributes to comfort, solidarity, humor, anxiety, fear, vulnerability, conflict, or emotional distancing. The relational dimension examines how switching reinforces, modifies, or challenges interpersonal relationships, including forms of friendship and surrogate kinship. Finally, the identity dimension considers how language choice communicates cultural affiliation, diasporic positioning, belonging, or identity tension.

The interpretation is guided primarily by Myers-Scotton's (1993) Markedness Model, particularly the relationship between code choice and socially understood rights-and-obligations expectations. Linguistic choices are therefore interpreted in relation to the specific interaction rather than assigned fixed meanings in advance. Urdu is not automatically treated as intimate or unmarked, nor is English automatically regarded as formal or marked; instead, the significance of each choice is determined by the relationship between participants, the communicative setting, and the expectations operating within the particular scene.

The analysis is consequently interpretive rather than statistically generalizable. It does not claim to represent the frequency or distribution of code-switching in naturally occurring Pakistani-English bilingual speech. Instead, it examines how Naqvi constructs bilingual interaction within the fictional world of *Home Boy* and how these linguistic representations contribute to the novel's broader concerns with diasporic identity, belonging, emotional experience, cultural continuity, and social negotiation. This methodological delimitation ensures that the findings remain grounded in the textual evidence while recognizing the constructed nature of literary dialogue.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Unmarked Switching and Pakistani Identity Maintenance

The source analysis identifies unmarked Urdu use as a significant mechanism for maintaining Pakistani cultural identity without requiring characters to make explicit declarations of cultural difference. Urdu appears as an ordinary and socially expected component of intimate, friendship-based, and kin-oriented communication. Because such choices conform to the established expectations of the in-group, they reproduce cultural identity through routine interaction rather than through deliberate or confrontational displays of ethnicity. In Myers-Scotton's (1993) terms, unmarked choices reinforce an existing rights-and-obligations (RO) set and thereby maintain relational and cultural continuity.

The identity significance of this pattern lies in its **quiet and habitual character**. Pakistani identity does not have to be explicitly announced because it is embedded in everyday linguistic practices. Urdu expressions can carry culturally specific associations of respect, loyalty, familiarity, shared responsibility, humor, and emotional closeness that are understood by participants who share the relevant cultural background. In this sense, Urdu operates as a living cultural resource through which characters preserve connections to their Pakistani background while living in an English-dominant environment.

Unmarked switching can therefore be interpreted as a form of cultural continuity and emotional **resilience**. Rather than representing resistance through direct opposition to the host society, it allows characters to retain elements of cultural identity within ordinary social interaction. This process is particularly significant in a diasporic context, where geographical separation from the

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homeland can create pressures toward linguistic and cultural assimilation. The continued use of Urdu consequently provides characters with a familiar symbolic and relational space in which Pakistani identity can be reproduced and sustained.

4.2 Marked Switching and Identity Stress

Marked switching becomes particularly significant when the ordinary balance between linguistic expectations and emotional or social demands is disturbed. According to Myers-Scotton's (1993) Markedness Model, a marked choice may signal a departure from the expected RO set and consequently indicate a change in social positioning. In *Home Boy*, such departures can become associated with emotional pressure, interpersonal tension, fear, vulnerability, and situations in which characters must reconsider how they present themselves to others.

The source thesis identifies English-to-Urdu movement as potentially intensifying emotionally grounded Pakistani self-positioning, particularly when characters experience distress or require cultural and emotional familiarity. A movement toward Urdu can therefore reactivate a culturally recognizable identity at moments when emotional security is threatened. Conversely, Urdu-to-English movement may contribute to emotional distancing, regulate vulnerability, or facilitate alignment with a more public-facing identity. Such choices should not, however, be interpreted as having fixed meanings. Their significance depends on the interactional context, participants, and social expectations surrounding the exchange.

Marked switching thus reveals identity under pressure rather than a simple division between Pakistani and American identities. The post-9/11 environment represented in *Home Boy* intensifies this pressure through surveillance, racialization, suspicion, and institutional expectations. In such circumstances, characters may become conscious of how their cultural identity is perceived by others and may regulate the degree to which that identity is linguistically displayed. Language consequently becomes a site where cultural identity can be protected, temporarily contained, strategically emphasized, or renegotiated.

This finding also demonstrates that markedness has an important psychological and social dimension. A marked linguistic choice can expose the tension between the identity a character privately experiences and the identity that may be considered safer or more acceptable in a particular public environment. Code-switching therefore becomes a mechanism for managing the visibility of cultural identity under conditions of social uncertainty.

4.3 Exploratory Switching and Negotiated Belonging

Exploratory code-switching is particularly relevant to situations involving unfamiliar interlocutors, institutional authorities, public spaces, and mixed audiences. In these contexts, the appropriate social expectations or RO set may not yet be established. Characters may consequently move tentatively between Urdu and English as they attempt to determine the linguistic and interpersonal expectations of the interaction. Such switching represents not simply uncertainty about language but uncertainty about **how** the self should be positioned socially.

The emotional orientation of exploratory switching may include hesitation, anxiety, vigilance, caution, and fear of misunderstanding or misrecognition. A character may avoid immediately committing to either a culturally intimate or publicly assimilated linguistic position and instead observe the responses of others before determining the most appropriate code. Language thus becomes an interactional resource for testing social boundaries and assessing whether cultural familiarity, distance, or accommodation is appropriate.

From an identity perspective, exploratory switching demonstrates that belonging is not necessarily predetermined. It can **be negotiated in real time** through interaction. Characters assess their surroundings, interpret the responses of interlocutors, and adjust their linguistic

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behavior accordingly. This process is particularly important for diasporic subjects who frequently move between cultural environments with different expectations regarding language, identity, and social behavior. Exploratory switching therefore captures the uncertainty inherent in occupying an intermediate or culturally hybrid social position.

4.4 Hybrid Diasporic Identity

The interaction of unmarked, marked, and exploratory choices produces a representation of hybrid diasporic identity. The characters in *Home Boy* inhabit more than one cultural and linguistic world, and their movement between Urdu and English reflects both emotional attachment to Pakistani culture and practical engagement with American social realities. Their identity is consequently neither entirely determined by the culture of origin nor completely absorbed into the host environment.

This hybridity should not be understood simply as the mechanical combination of two languages. Rather, it represents an ongoing process of balancing cultural continuity, social legitimacy, emotional security, and **belonging**. The bilingual repertoire gives characters linguistic resources through which they can shift between different interpersonal and social positions. Urdu can support cultural familiarity and relational intimacy in appropriate contexts, while English can facilitate participation in wider public, institutional, and multicultural environments. At the same time, either language can acquire different meanings when the interactional context changes.

The findings therefore support a view of diasporic identity **as fluid, relational, and situational.** Characters may emphasize different aspects of themselves depending on who they are addressing, where the interaction occurs, what emotional pressures are present, and what social consequences they anticipate. Code-switching makes these shifts visible at the textual level and allows the novel to represent identity not as a stable possession but as something continuously negotiated through social interaction.

4.5 Code-Switching as Identity and Survival Strategy

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that code-switching performs an important adaptive function within the diasporic environment represented in *Home Boy*. In familiar interpersonal settings, unmarked Urdu can provide cultural security, continuity, and a sense of shared belonging. Under emotional or social pressure, marked switching enables characters to recalibrate their identity, emotional stance, and interpersonal positioning. In uncertain encounters, exploratory switching provides a cautious mechanism for testing social boundaries and determining appropriate forms of participation.

Code-switching can therefore be interpreted as an identity-negotiation and adaptive survival strategy. It enables characters to preserve cultural affiliation while responding flexibly to the demands of their immediate social environment. This interpretation is particularly significant within the post-9/11 setting of the novel, where cultural visibility may carry social and institutional consequences. Linguistic flexibility consequently becomes a resource for managing not only cultural belonging but also emotional safety, social acceptance, and interpersonal risk.

This interpretation complements Jain's (2021) discussion of diasporic belonging as situational and Agustsdóttir's (2020) examination of post-9/11 Muslim-American literary contexts. However, the present analysis contributes a more explicitly sociolinguistic dimension by demonstrating how broad concerns such as displacement, belonging, racialization, and identity negotiation are represented through concrete linguistic choices. The significance of *Home Boy* therefore lies not only in what its characters say about identity but also in how their movement between Urdu and English performs and negotiates that identity.

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Overall, the findings demonstrate that unmarked, marked, and exploratory code choices constitute interconnected strategies through which diasporic identity is maintained, challenged, tested, and reconstructed. Urdu-English code-switching thus provides a linguistic representation of the broader diasporic experience: maintaining cultural roots while adapting to new social environments, seeking belonging while managing difference, and preserving a sense of self under conditions of uncertainty and social pressure.

5. Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that Urdu-English code-switching in Home Boy represents diasporic identity as relational, situational, and linguistically mediated. Unmarked Urdu practices preserve Pakistani cultural identity and normalize belonging within the in-group. Marked switching reveals identity stress and permits emotional distancing, self-protection, or renewed cultural assertion. Exploratory switching becomes a mechanism for managing uncertainty when social norms are ambiguous.

The study consequently supports the argument that identity in diasporic fiction is not a fixed possession but an ongoing process of negotiation. Language connects homeland and host land, private emotion and public conduct, and cultural memory with present social demands. Through this bilingual repertoire, Home Boy represents characters as simultaneously Pakistani, diasporic, and hybrid.

6. Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, the analysis demonstrates the usefulness of Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model for literary discourse, particularly for identifying how linguistic choices correspond to social expectations and identity positioning. It also contributes to literary sociolinguistics by moving beyond thematic discussions of migration and identity toward micro-level language practices.

Practically, the findings can inform researchers and teachers working on Pakistani English literature, bilingualism, diaspora, and sociolinguistics by demonstrating how textual language choices can be systematically categorized and interpreted. The paper also supports future comparative work across South Asian diasporic texts and language combinations.

7. Limitations and Future Research

The analysis is limited to one literary text, selected passages, and one principal theoretical framework. It does not include interviews, surveys, reader-response data, or a corpus-based frequency analysis. The findings should therefore be understood as interpretive conclusions about the representation of bilingual identity in Home Boy rather than generalizations about all Pakistani bilingual speakers.

Future studies can compare Home Boy with other Pakistani or South Asian diasporic novels, examine Punjabi-English or Hindi-English literary code-switching, apply Conversation Analysis or indexicality-based approaches, and combine literary analysis with corpus and reader-reception methods. Such studies could test whether the identity patterns identified here are specific to Naqvi's novel or more widely characteristic of South Asian diasporic fiction.

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