

Unpacking Identity Dynamics of the Main Character in the Novel *Kimchi Confessions*: Implications for Multicultural Education

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Abstract

The identity dynamics of a main character in a novel refer to how their sense of self, values, beliefs, and overall identity evolve throughout the narrative. These dynamics are shaped by psychological, emotional, and social factors, which influence how the character perceives themselves and is perceived by others. This process often occurs in response to the conflicts, experiences, or challenges the character faces. In literature, such transformations serve as powerful tools for examining broader societal themes, such as belonging, cultural assimilation, and personal growth. This research aims to analyze the identity dynamics of the main character in *Kimchi Confessions* by Xaviera Putri, exploring its implications for multicultural education in Indonesia. Employing a qualitative research method, this study uses a descriptive analysis approach to gain a deep understanding of the main character's identity development. The data source for this study is *Kimchi Confessions*, a novel inspired by Xaviera Putri's personal experiences living in South Korea during her high school years. Published in 2023 by Gagas Media, the novel spans 200 pages. Data analysis is conducted using a discourse analysis approach to identify how the main character's identity is represented throughout the narrative. The findings reveal that Xaviera's experiences emphasize the importance of multicultural education in promoting cross-cultural understanding and inclusivity in Indonesia. This study highlights how literature can serve as a tool for fostering empathy and cultural awareness, suggesting that further research into identity dynamics in contemporary literature can enhance educational practices and societal integration.

Keywords: Identity dynamics; Identity transformation; Main character; Multicultural education

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INTRODUCTION

The dynamics of a character's identity in a novel can be viewed as the evolving self-concept that undergoes transformation throughout the narrative. This evolution results from a complex interplay of personal experiences, social interactions, and cultural confrontations that challenge the protagonist to navigate different layers of identity. In Xaviera Putri's novel *Kimchi Confessions*, this theme of identity dynamics is vividly illustrated through the journey of the main character, Xaviera, who faces a shifting sense of self while studying in South Korea. As Papalia (as cited in Saharu et al., 2023) states, identity encompasses both similarity and distinction from others, and is molded by natural factors, environmental influences, and social needs. Xaviera embodies this notion of identity as she embarks on a challenging quest for self-discovery within the Korean cultural landscape, far removed from her Indonesian roots. Her story captures the essence of multicultural identity dynamics, showing the character's internal struggle as she tries to adapt and belong to a culture that is distinct from her own.

In *Kimchi Confessions*, Xaviera's decision to pursue higher education in South Korea represents a significant step in her life, revealing her determination and ambition. Moving to South Korea on a scholarship, she is soon immersed in a culture that operates on social norms, high work standards, and individualistic values that contrast starkly with her Indonesian upbringing. Xaviera's experiences emphasize the cross-cultural challenges international students face, particularly when entering a society that has distinct cultural practices and expectations. It usually happens as international learners move to new environment (De Beer, 2024; Choi & Park, 2024). Learning a new language, adapting to formal social etiquette, and embracing individualistic attitudes require significant adjustment, challenging her sense of identity (Jang & Oh, 2024). These changes lead to moments of identity loss, where Xaviera feels disconnected from her origins while not fully integrating into Korean society. This journey toward finding her balance highlights the layered identity she cultivates over time, forming a hybrid self that incorporates elements from both cultures.

A pivotal moment in *Kimchi Confessions* occurs when Xaviera introduces herself to her classmates in South Korea. This scene is significant because it marks the beginning of her journey into a new cultural environment (Lahiri & Padhee, 2024; Rarastesia, 2024), highlighting the challenges she faces as an outsider. As Xaviera steps into the classroom and addresses her peers, her discomfort is palpable. She is caught between the desire to fit in and the realization that her identity, shaped by her Indonesian background, sets her apart from her classmates. This moment is charged with emotional tension as Xaviera grapples with the complexities of self-presentation in an unfamiliar culture. In this scene, cultural dilemmas come to the forefront (Akbar, 2024; Lahiri & Padhee, 2024). Xaviera's internal struggle reflects the broader challenges faced by individuals navigating cross-cultural spaces. On one hand, there is the pressure to conform to local norms and expectations in order to be accepted by her peers. On the other hand, Xaviera's unique cultural identity is something she cannot easily shed, and this tension creates a sense of alienation. This moment in the novel vividly captures the experience of cultural dissonance, where the character must balance personal authenticity with the desire for social inclusion. It exemplifies the emotional and psychological challenges faced by individuals in multicultural settings, highlighting how cultural dilemmas can shape identity and influence one's sense of belonging.

Her Indonesian heritage is a visible marker that distinguishes her from her Korean peers, leading her to confront feelings of cultural isolation. As a woman in a foreign country, she is keenly aware of the contrasts between her background and the Korean social landscape, which requires her to navigate uncharted territory. This encounter symbolizes a critical phase in her identity journey, as she experiences, for the first time, the complexities of living in an environment that differs profoundly from her cultural roots. It is in line with Nathania and Azeharie (2024) argue that individual internal struggle during this encounter illustrates the broader challenges that individuals from diverse backgrounds face when integrating into a new society.

The cultural and religious context of *Kimchi Confessions* further underscores the protagonist's journey, demonstrating how a new cultural environment can both enlighten and estrange an individual. Xaviera's efforts to adapt reveal the effects of cultural diversity on her self-exploration, as misunderstandings, confusion, and occasional social exclusion punctuate her interactions with the Korean community. As Maulidan and Darmawan (2024) suggest, living in a foreign environment can lead to significant changes in one's identity, both positively and negatively. Xaviera's experience underscores the importance of multicultural education, which can provide individuals with the skills needed to navigate cultural diversity with an open and appreciative perspective. Through her

character, the novel promotes an understanding of multiculturalism, emphasizing the value of embracing cultural differences and expanding one's worldview.

The novel goes beyond personal identity struggles, portraying Xaviera's journey as emblematic of the broader multicultural dynamics in our increasingly globalized world. The protagonist's challenges in finding her identity within a foreign culture are relatable to many who live between cultural worlds. The novel not only sheds light on multicultural issues but also provides a foundation for understanding cultural diversity in a new environment. Xaviera's identity is shaped by various social, linguistic, and cultural exclusions, all of which are integral to her journey in establishing her place in South Korean society. As an international student, her struggle with the language barrier becomes a primary obstacle that limits her participation in social and academic settings, demonstrating how significant cultural and linguistic differences can influence identity in a new context. Her experiences underscore the need for more inclusive multicultural approaches, particularly in educational settings where cultural diversity is prevalent.

Incorporating multicultural values into education, as Maulidan and Darmawan (2024) argue, can help students gain a broader perspective on historical events, recognizing that history and culture are not monolithic but formed by multiple influences. This perspective applies to the identity dynamics portrayed in *Kimchi Confessions*, where Xaviera's attempts to assimilate into South Korean culture echo the complexities of adapting to a multicultural society. Her journey aligns with Maulidan and Darmawan's argument that multicultural experiences foster empathy and tolerance, allowing individuals to appreciate cultural differences rather than viewing them as barriers (Firdaus & Yulistiyan, 2022).

The novel presents linguistic adaptation as a significant aspect of Xaviera's identity dynamics, illustrated by her attempts to blend elements from both cultures in her speech and behavior. Switching between two languages or adopting cultural expressions associated with Korean culture reflects her complex identity journey (Choi & Park, 2024). Her struggle to adapt linguistically highlights the layered nature of cultural identity and the role of language as a mediator in cultural adaptation. Xaviera's story thus serves as an exploration of how multicultural education can foster a more nuanced understanding of identity, teaching readers the importance of empathy and inclusivity in culturally diverse settings. This study, therefore, aims to reveal how the identity dynamics illustrated in **Kimchi Confessions** offer fresh perspectives on multicultural education, advocating for greater cultural awareness and sensitivity within learning environments.

Compared to previous studies on multiculturalism, such as those by Saifullah (2023), Maulidan and Darmawan (2024), Astuti et al. (2023), and Joel et al. (2024), this study brings a unique perspective by focusing on the protagonist's deeply personal experience with cultural identity. While earlier studies primarily examined intercultural relations, nationalistic values, or mythological themes, *Kimchi Confessions* delves into the individual transformation of the main character within a multicultural context. This approach is novel as it emphasizes the personal implications of cultural adaptation and identity formation rather than broader cultural or social dynamics alone. By centering on the protagonist's internal conflict and adaptation, the novel provides an intimate portrayal of the identity challenges faced by individuals in multicultural settings, making a valuable contribution to the discourse on multicultural education and identity.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach paired with descriptive analysis to delve deeply into the subjective attitudes, opinions, and behaviors of the characters within the novel. Qualitative research aims to capture the complexity of human experiences through

an immersive and interpretative lens. As Kusumastuti (2019) explains, qualitative research seeks to attain a nuanced understanding of complex phenomena by drawing from the subjective perspectives of those directly engaged in the situation. This method allows the researcher to interpret and convey the essence of the experiences within the novel as seen from the viewpoint of an individual deeply embedded in the storyline. Through such a methodological lens, the study aims to reveal the intricate identity dynamics portrayed in *Kimchi Confessions* by Xaviera Putri, exploring the protagonist's multicultural experiences and shifts in identity.

Research Data Sources

The data for this research is drawn directly from textual elements within *Kimchi Confessions*, where specific passages and statements by the main character are examined repeatedly and analyzed to uncover relevant aspects of multicultural education and identity theory. The researcher read the novel multiple times, meticulously noting lines and sections where the protagonist's evolving identity and experiences with cultural differences are most apparent. The aim of this process was to uncover the changing representations of identity as depicted in the protagonist's narrative, as well as how these shifts in identity influence her perceptions of other cultures. By closely examining how multiculturalism and identity are intertwined in the main character's journey, this study provides insights into the novel's exploration of personal transformation and cross-cultural understanding.

The primary data source for this study is *Kimchi Confessions*, a novel inspired by Xaviera Putri's own experiences after moving to South Korea during high school. Published by Gagas Media in 2023, this 200-page work chronicles the protagonist's life as a high school student in Korea. As the author describes, the book unveils the "hidden story of my life as a Korean high school student. I hope this book can be a companion for those feeling lost and lonely while pursuing their dreams." This sentiment reflects the core themes of the novel, particularly in how it addresses the journey of self-discovery and the challenges that arise in adapting to a vastly different cultural environment. By drawing from the protagonist's experiences, *Kimchi Confessions* provides a vivid portrait of the complexities associated with identity formation and multicultural adaptation, making it a rich resource for exploring the ways cultural immersion influences individual growth.

Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study is conducted using a discourse analysis approach to capture how the protagonist's identity is constructed and represented through her experiences within the novel. Discourse analysis is an effective tool for examining how language and interactions shape the portrayal of identity, especially in the context of multicultural adaptation. This analysis follows three main stages. First, data reduction is carried out to filter and select relevant sections directly linked to identity dynamics, ensuring that only the most pertinent examples are analyzed. The second stage is data presentation, where the findings are narrated to highlight the protagonist's evolving identity, illustrating how her encounters with a new cultural landscape reshape her self-perception. Finally, conclusions are drawn to connect the results to the broader concept of multicultural education, offering insights into how identity development is influenced by cross-cultural exposure and adaptation.

This approach not only provides a structured means of analyzing the identity shifts of the main character but also allows for a more systematic interpretation of the novel's messages on multiculturalism. Through discourse analysis, the study seeks to uncover how *Kimchi Confessions* uses narrative and dialogue to depict the protagonist's identity journey, showing how multicultural experiences foster personal growth and broaden one's perspective on cultural diversity. The novel becomes a vehicle for examining the

implications of multicultural education, offering readers a glimpse into how navigating multiple cultural contexts can transform one's understanding of self and others. In sum, this study highlights the significance of cultural adaptation in shaping individual identity and underscores the role of multiculturalism in broadening our view of identity beyond geographical or cultural boundaries.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

One of the most striking aspects of **Kimchi Confessions** is how Xaviera Putri, as the author, seemingly "tells her own story" through the protagonist. This approach is a common literary technique authors use to infuse personal authenticity and depth into their stories, often turning the main character into an alter ego that mirrors the author's own experiences, emotions, and challenges. In this novel, the main character serves as an avenue through which the author reflects on the experiences of a teenager far from home, struggling to adapt to a foreign culture. According to Rozi (2013), identity shifts are an inevitable part of engaging with the cultural dynamics that form ethnic identities. In **Kimchi Confessions**, Xaviera's transformation is driven by her interactions with South Korean culture, as well as her experience as an Indonesian cultural minority within an unfamiliar environment. Through this dynamic, she undergoes an adaptation process that reshapes certain aspects of her identity while remaining rooted in her cultural origins.

This transformation reflects Xaviera's efforts to assimilate into a new culture while holding onto the values of her ethnic identity. Consistent with Rozi's perspective, the protagonist's identity shift does not equate to abandoning her original identity; rather, it is a rich process of adjustment and self-reflection. Her identity grows in response to the multicultural environment, which demands adaptation without forgetting her roots, thereby strengthening her self-understanding in a globalized context.

Identity Dynamics of the Protagonist in Kimchi Confessions

Psychological Transformation

Initially, the main character feels insecure and uncomfortable in her new environment, particularly due to cultural differences and high academic expectations. She describes South Korean high schools as overly demanding, with rigorous schedules that push students to study constantly. Over time, however, she learns to adapt, overcome obstacles, and discover her inner resilience. A vivid example of cultural adaptation in *Kimchi Confessions* is seen in Xaviera's experience at the school dormitory, where rules are strictly enforced, and students are expected to conform to a highly structured daily routine. Xaviera explains that there is a "tweshil" time, during which students are not allowed to be in their rooms or dorms except during specific hours—lunch, dinner, and after the nightly "self-study session," which ends around 10 p.m. This rigid structure reflects the cultural expectations of the educational environment, where discipline and high standards are paramount. Xaviera's adjustment to this environment underscores the broader theme of adapting to a different educational culture, which often requires individuals to navigate unfamiliar rules and expectations.

This scenario exemplifies the challenge of adjusting one's identity to fit a new cultural framework. According to Gultom, Munir, and Ariani (2019), human identity is often mistakenly viewed as fixed or static. However, philosophers like Aristotle and Zygmunt Bauman argue that change is a fundamental aspect of human life. Bauman's concept of "liquid modernity" describes the constantly shifting nature of today's world, where identities are equally fluid and adaptable. Viewing identity as static can hinder psychological development, as it limits individuals' capacity to respond to new challenges and growth opportunities. On the other hand, embracing identity as fluid allows individuals to remain open to change, fostering personal development and emotional resilience.

In the context of multicultural education, this highlights the importance of fostering flexibility and adaptability in students. Educators can encourage students to embrace fluid identities, promoting an openness to cultural differences and experiences (Choi & Park, 2024; Jang & Oh, 2024). By doing so, students can develop the skills necessary for navigating diverse environments and grow into more empathetic, self-aware individuals. Multicultural education should, therefore, not only focus on cultural knowledge but also on fostering adaptability and personal growth in a constantly changing world.

Discovering Self-Identity

Living far from her familiar environment, Xaviera engages in profound introspection, discovering her true identity in a foreign land where she often feels like an outsider. Being a Muslim in a predominantly non-Muslim country like South Korea further distinguishes her from those around her. At school, her classmates are intrigued by her hijab and Muslim customs, such as praying, fasting, and celebrating Eid. Additionally, her limited Korean language skills pose a challenge.

Xaviera reflects on her experiences in South Korea, saying, “I’ve gotten used to the curious or surprised looks about my hijab and the whispered conversations—even if I don’t fully understand all the words. Terms like ‘waegookin’ (foreigner) and ‘musselim’ (Muslim) tell me that they’re talking about me—or more precisely, about my identity. I realize it’s only natural, as they rarely see ‘foreigners’ like me.” This statement captures Xaviera’s awareness of how her identity as a Muslim foreigner in South Korea becomes a point of curiosity and judgment. Despite not understanding all the whispered conversations, Xaviera recognizes the labels—‘waegookin’ and ‘musselim’—used to categorize her. These terms reflect how her identity is framed by others, revealing the challenges of being a minority in a foreign land.

Xaviera’s experience aligns with Umayyaton’s (2018) observations on the resilience of Muslim minority identities in South Korea. Despite facing social judgment and feelings of isolation, Xaviera finds strength in her identity. The process of enduring cultural challenges helps her reflect more deeply on who she is. Her experiences highlight how minority status can serve as a catalyst for personal transformation, leading to a stronger sense of self-acceptance and a more solidified identity. For Xaviera, the cultural challenges she faces do not diminish her sense of self but instead reinforce her values and self-awareness. In the context of multicultural education, Xaviera’s journey emphasizes the importance of nurturing resilience in students from minority backgrounds. Educators should focus on helping students develop a strong sense of identity and self-worth in the face of cultural adversity (Choi & Park, 2024; Jang & Oh, 2024). By fostering an environment that encourages introspection and cultural awareness, multicultural education can empower students to embrace their identities, enhance self-acceptance, and navigate societal challenges with confidence and resilience.

Conflict: Language Barrier

Upon arriving in South Korea, Xaviera’s Korean language proficiency was limited to basic phrases and reading Hangul. She recounts how she could say only a few simple phrases like “annyeong haseyo” (hello) and “kamsahamnida” (thank you). Over time, she improved her vocabulary, partially through a pre-departure language program. However, she faced a “language barrier that made our situation as a minority even worse. First, it limited our ability to make friends or even communicate on a simple level with Korean students.” During extracurricular sign-ups, she recalls being turned away: “Sorry, we don’t accept international students in this club,” a Korean student told her at a registration booth. When she asked why, the student replied, “We don’t have anyone fluent in English, so please understand.”

According to Muchtar, Koswara, and Setiaman (2016), humans are inherently social beings who rely on interaction and cooperation within various social groups. In Xaviera's identity journey, this concept is highly relevant. Initially, she feels alienated due to language barriers and her minority status in South Korea. However, the need to connect with others and belong motivates her to learn, adapt, and grow. These social interactions act as a bridge, helping Xaviera better understand and accept the surrounding culture while holding on to her own identity. Through learning and sharing experiences with her community, she not only overcomes her challenges but also enriches her self-understanding, transforming her identity from something fixed to something that evolves through social interaction.

Themes of Multiculturalism

This exploration of cultural differences provides a foundation for discussing multiculturalism in **Kimchi Confessions**, particularly through the protagonist's introduction on her first day at the Korean high school: "I remember that day well. It was the first day of school in Korea, and we each had to introduce ourselves to the class." She recalls saying, "Hello everyone, nice to meet you! My name is Xaviera, I'm from Indonesia, and I love math and music. Thank you." Her teacher then prompted the class, "Does anyone have questions for Xaviera?" One student asked, "Do you bow?" making exaggerated bowing gestures.

As Hadiniyati, Annisa, Nugroho, et al. (2023) suggest, identity is shaped through interactions and unique traits based on individual experiences, character, and observation. For Xaviera, as a cultural minority in South Korea, balancing her identity in a foreign cultural environment presents a significant challenge. Her cross-cultural interactions allow her to both understand her new environment and strengthen her self-identity. Through these interactions, Xaviera develops the ability to appreciate and respect other cultures, embodying the theme of multiculturalism. Her identity is formed not in a static space but through her experiences, observations, and reflections in a diverse social context. Thus, she not only maintains her original identity but also enhances it through appreciation and recognition of other cultures, highlighting the essence of cross-cultural interaction.

The novel further explores multiculturalism, particularly the experiences of discrimination often faced by individuals from different cultural backgrounds. During club registration week, she recalls familiar rejection: "Sorry, we don't accept international students in this club," and responds with a resigned "Oh, okay." This example underscores how cultural biases can marginalize minorities, underscoring the importance of inclusivity in multicultural environments. According to Fadilah and Falah (2022), the term "minority" should not center around dominance but rather on creating inclusive and equitable environments within diversity. Xaviera's experiences in **Kimchi Confessions** reflect this perspective, as her encounters with discrimination reveal how perceptions of "minority" should shift toward inclusivity and open-mindedness. This multicultural theme stresses the need for welcoming attitudes toward cultural differences in social settings, such as schools.

In summary, Xaviera Putri's novel **Kimchi Confessions** explores the protagonist's identity conflict as an Indonesian minority adapting to life in South Korea. In response to cultural and social challenges, Xaviera's identity evolves mentally, spiritually, and socially. Through this journey, she not only maintains her cultural roots but also enhances her self-identity through reflection and adaptation. The novel delivers a strong message on the importance of inclusivity and cultural awareness, especially when navigating different environments. Xaviera's story demonstrates that respectful cross-cultural interactions aid self-discovery and identity growth, overcoming discrimination and alienation. This message holds great relevance in multicultural education in Indonesia, underscoring the

importance of inclusivity and cultural appreciation in fostering a respectful and diverse learning environment.

CONCLUSION

In *Kimchi Confessions*, Xaviera Putri provides a vivid exploration of identity dynamics through the protagonist's journey of adaptation and self-discovery in a foreign culture. Through experiences shaped by cultural, linguistic, and social challenges, Xaviera undergoes significant personal growth while maintaining her Indonesian roots and Islamic values. The novel emphasizes the fluidity of identity, illustrating how adapting to new environments requires both resilience and openness. Xaviera's story highlights how identity is not static but rather continually shaped by social interactions and cultural experiences. As a minority in South Korea, she confronts exclusion and prejudice, yet these challenges ultimately lead to a stronger, more introspective understanding of herself. This journey underscores the notion that identity is enriched, rather than diminished, by exposure to different cultures, as each interaction offers new insights and contributes to personal development.

The novel's emphasis on multiculturalism presents a critical message on the importance of inclusivity, tolerance, and respect in diverse societies. Xaviera's experiences reflect the transformative power of cross-cultural encounters, particularly in education, where understanding and empathy can bridge cultural divides. Her story reveals that multicultural education is essential not only for individuals like Xaviera but for societies striving toward a more inclusive global perspective. **Kimchi Confessions** advocates for a world where cultural diversity is not just acknowledged but valued, reminding readers that true self-discovery often lies in embracing both our heritage and the broader cultural contexts we encounter. This narrative is especially relevant to multicultural education, offering a framework for understanding how inclusivity and cultural awareness contribute to enriched learning environments that honor diversity and support individual growth.

RECOMMENDATION

For future research, it would be valuable to further explore how the dynamics of identity in multicultural settings are represented in contemporary literature, especially within the context of young adult fiction. **Kimchi Confessions** provides a compelling case study, but there are many other novels that address similar themes of identity formation, cultural adaptation, and the challenges faced by individuals navigating between different cultural worlds. A comparative analysis of other works that depict young adults in multicultural environments could offer deeper insights into common patterns and unique variations in identity dynamics. This could also expand the understanding of how different cultural, social, and political contexts influence the development of identity, especially in a globalized world where cross-cultural interactions are increasingly common.

Moreover, further studies could investigate the role of language acquisition and linguistic barriers in shaping identity, particularly for individuals living in countries where they are part of a linguistic minority. As demonstrated in *Kimchi Confessions*, language barriers significantly affect social integration and personal growth. Future research could examine how fluency in a second language affects the identity formation process, focusing on both the cognitive and emotional challenges of language acquisition. Investigating this through the lens of psycholinguistics could offer a more nuanced understanding of how language and identity are interconnected in multicultural contexts. Additionally, research could explore how multilingual individuals navigate multiple identities, balancing their original cultural identity with the identity they adopt in a new linguistic environment.

Another promising direction for future research would be to assess the impact of multicultural education on students' identity development. **Kimchi Confessions**

highlights the challenges that Xaviera faces in an educational setting, and future studies could examine how inclusive educational practices, cultural awareness, and anti-discrimination initiatives in schools influence students' ability to maintain their cultural identity while adapting to new environments. This would be particularly important in diverse educational systems, where students from different backgrounds may struggle to reconcile their personal and academic lives. Understanding how curricula, teacher training, and peer relationships support or hinder identity development could contribute to improving multicultural educational strategies and fostering more inclusive and supportive environments for students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

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