

Multiculturalism in The Buddha of Suburbia and The Inheritance of Loss

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Abstract:

In an increasingly interconnected world, questions of culture, migration, and identity have become central to contemporary English literature. Hanif Kureishi's The Buddha of Suburbia (1990) and Kiran Desai's The Inheritance of Loss (2006) are two important postcolonial novels that explore these issues through the lived experiences of individuals caught between different cultures, languages, and social realities. Both novels present characters who struggle to define themselves while navigating the complexities of race, ethnicity, class, nationality, and cultural belonging in societies shaped by colonial history and globalization. This paper examines how Kureishi and Desai portray multiculturalism as a simple celebration of cultural diversity and as a complex and often contradictory social experience. Their narratives reveal that migration creates opportunities for personal growth and cultural exchange, yet it also produces feelings of displacement, alienation, and identity conflict. The protagonists experience cultural hybridity, where multiple identities coexist, overlap, and sometimes clash, challenging fixed or essential notions of race and nationality. Through their personal journeys, the novels expose the persistence of racial prejudice, social inequality, and the lasting influence of colonial power structures in both Britain and India. Drawing upon postcolonial concepts developed by Homi K. Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Edward Said, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, this study analyzes how hybridity, the "third space," diaspora, and identity politics shape the characters' experiences. It argues that both novels question the idealized image of multicultural societies by revealing the tensions between inclusion and exclusion, belonging and marginalization, and tradition and modernity. While multiculturalism promises equality and acceptance, the realities depicted in these texts often expose discrimination, cultural misunderstanding, and unequal power relations. At the same time, the novels demonstrate the resilience of individuals who negotiate multiple cultural identities and create new forms of belonging.

Keywords:

Multiculturalism, Hybridity, Migration, Identity Politics, Postcolonialism, Diaspora, Cultural Identity, Hanif Kureishi, Kiran Desai, The Buddha of Suburbia, The Inheritance of Loss, Global English Literature.

Introduction:

Multiculturalism has emerged as one of the most important concepts in contemporary cultural, political, and literary discourse. It refers to the coexistence of people from diverse cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds within the same society while

promoting mutual respect, equality, and social inclusion. In an era marked by globalization, transnational migration, and increased cultural interaction, multiculturalism has become both an ideal and a challenge. While many nations celebrate cultural diversity as a symbol of democratic values and social progress, the lived experiences of migrants and minority communities often reveal inequalities, discrimination, and struggles for recognition. Postcolonial literature, in particular, offers valuable insights into the intersections of migration, hybridity, identity, and cultural belonging. Writers from formerly colonized nations frequently explore the continuing effects of colonialism on individual and collective identities. Their works portray the experiences of people who live between cultures, negotiate multiple identities, and confront issues of race, class, language, nationality, and power. Rather than presenting culture as fixed or homogeneous, postcolonial literature emphasizes its dynamic and evolving nature, demonstrating how identities are continuously shaped by historical, political, and social forces.

Hanif Kureishi and Kiran Desai are among the most influential contemporary postcolonial writers whose works critically engage with these concerns. Although they write from different geographical and cultural contexts, both authors investigate the emotional, psychological, and social consequences of migration and cultural displacement. Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) is set in multicultural Britain during the 1970s and explores the life of Karim Amir, a young man of mixed English and South Asian heritage. Through Karim's experiences, the novel examines racial prejudice, cultural hybridity, sexuality, class mobility, and the search for identity within a society that celebrates multiculturalism while simultaneously maintaining racial and social hierarchies. Kureishi presents London as a space where different cultures meet, yet where prejudice and exclusion continue to shape everyday life.

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), set primarily in Kalimpong in the Himalayan foothills of India with parallel narratives in the United States, and extends these concerns into the context of globalization and postcolonial India. The novel explores migration, economic inequality, political unrest, and the lingering effects of colonialism through interconnected characters whose lives reflect feelings of displacement and cultural fragmentation. Desai demonstrates that migration does not necessarily guarantee opportunity or belonging; instead, it often produces loneliness, cultural alienation, and a persistent search for identity. The novel also highlights how colonial values continue to influence social aspirations, class distinctions, and perceptions of cultural superiority long after formal colonial rule has ended.

Multiculturalism in *The Buddha of Suburbia*:

Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) is regarded as one of the most important postcolonial novels to examine multicultural Britain during the late twentieth century. Set in suburban London during the 1970s, the novel portrays a society undergoing rapid social and cultural transformation due to immigration from former British colonies. Rather than presenting multiculturalism as a harmonious blending of cultures, Kureishi reveals its contradictions, exposing the racial prejudices, social inequalities, and identity crises that continue to exist beneath Britain's claims of tolerance and diversity. Through the experiences

of Karim Amir and other central characters, the novel illustrates how multiculturalism is shaped by power relations, colonial history, and cultural negotiations rather than by genuine equality.

Karim Amir's Hybrid Identity:

At the heart of the novel is Karim Amir, a young man born to an Indian father and an English mother. Karim introduces himself as "an Englishman born and bred, almost," a statement that immediately reveals the uncertainty surrounding his cultural identity. Although he has grown up in England and identifies with British society, his South Asian heritage prevents him from being fully accepted as English. At the same time, he does not possess a complete connection with Indian culture. Consequently, Karim occupies an in-between cultural space where he constantly negotiates multiple identities.

Karim's hybrid identity reflects Homi K. Bhabha's concept of **hybridity**, which suggests that cultural identity is never fixed or pure but emerges through continuous interaction between different traditions and histories. Throughout the novel, Karim refuses to accept rigid definitions based on race, nationality, or ethnicity. Instead, he embraces the complexity of belonging to more than one culture. His journey from the suburbs to London's theatrical world symbolizes physical movement and his search for self-definition within an increasingly multicultural society.

Karim's experiences also demonstrate that identity is influenced by factors beyond ethnicity. His encounters with different social classes, artistic communities, and sexual relationships reveal how identity is shaped through the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality. As he moves through various social spaces, Karim learns that belonging is never guaranteed; rather, it must be constantly negotiated. His personal journey illustrates the emotional and psychological challenges faced by second-generation immigrants who inherit multiple cultural traditions while seeking acceptance in a society that often categorizes individuals according to racial stereotypes.

Performance, Mimicry, and Cultural Representation:

One of the most powerful themes in *The Buddha of Suburbia* is the idea that identity itself becomes a form of performance. Characters are frequently expected to perform particular cultural roles in order to satisfy the expectations of British society. This performance reflects Edward Said's theory of **Orientalism**, which argues that Western societies often construct the East as mysterious, exotic, spiritual, and fundamentally different from themselves.

Haroon Amir, Karim's father, becomes widely known as the "Buddha of Suburbia" after reinventing himself as a mystical Indian spiritual teacher for wealthy middle-class English audiences. Although Haroon initially adopts this role to gain social recognition and economic stability, the performance gradually reveals the superficial fascination of British society with Eastern spirituality. His English followers admire an imagined version of India rather than engaging with its complex cultural reality. Kureishi therefore satirizes the commercialization of Eastern philosophy and exposes how multiculturalism sometimes reduces non-Western cultures to fashionable commodities for Western consumption.

Similarly, Jamila, another important character, resists traditional expectations imposed both by her immigrant family and by British society. She refuses to conform to patriarchal gender roles and challenges cultural stereotypes associated with South Asian women. Through education, political activism, and personal independence, Jamila constructs her own identity rather than accepting identities imposed upon her by either culture. Her character illustrates that multicultural identity is inherited and actively created through resistance and self-determination.

London as a Racialized Multicultural Space:

London occupies a central symbolic position in the novel as both a city of opportunity and a site of exclusion. It appears to offer freedom, artistic expression, and social mobility, attracting individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds who seek new possibilities. Yet beneath this image of cosmopolitanism lies a society deeply marked by racial discrimination, class divisions, and unequal power relations. Karim's experiences demonstrate that racial prejudice continues to shape everyday interactions despite Britain's official commitment to multiculturalism. He encounters discrimination in employment, theatre, and social life, where his ethnic identity often overshadows his individual talents. Theatre directors and producers frequently cast him in stereotypical "*Indian*" roles, reducing his artistic potential to racial expectations. Instead of recognizing his abilities as an actor, they expect him to perform exaggerated versions of South Asian identity for predominantly white audiences. These experiences illustrate how institutional racism operates subtly within cultural industries while claiming to celebrate diversity.

The novel also highlights the relationship between race and class. Many immigrant families occupy economically disadvantaged positions despite contributing to British society. The contrast between suburban middle-class comfort and the marginalization experienced by ethnic minorities exposes the unequal distribution of opportunities within multicultural Britain. London therefore becomes a paradoxical space where diversity is visible but genuine equality remains elusive.

Multiculturalism in *The Inheritance of Loss*:

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) offers a profound critique of multiculturalism by examining how colonial history, migration, class inequality, and global capitalism shape individual identities and social relationships. Unlike celebratory narratives of cultural diversity, Desai presents multiculturalism as a deeply unequal process in which some groups enjoy mobility and privilege while others experience exclusion, invisibility, and displacement. Set primarily in Kalimpong, a small Himalayan town near the borders of India, Nepal, and Tibet, with parallel narratives unfolding in New York, the novel connects local postcolonial realities with global patterns of migration and inequality. Through characters such as Sai, Jemubhai Patel (the judge), and Biju, Desai demonstrates that multicultural belonging is often fragmented, unstable, and conditioned by economic and racial power structures.

Colonial Legacies in Kalimpong:

Desai situates her narrative in Kalimpong, a town that bears the visible and invisible traces of the British Empire. The landscape itself becomes a symbolic reminder of colonial influence: English-style houses, imported cultural practices, and aspirations associated with Western modernity continue to shape everyday life long after the end of formal colonial rule. The judge's residence, Cho Oyu, is a home and a monument to colonial nostalgia, reflecting a desire to preserve an imagined world of British refinement and superiority.

Jemubhai Patel embodies the psychological consequences of colonialism. Educated in England during the colonial period, he internalizes racist attitudes directed against Indians and gradually develops a deep sense of shame about his own cultural origins. His attempts to imitate British manners, language, and behavior do not lead to acceptance; instead, they produce alienation from both British society and his Indian community. This reflects Frantz Fanon's analysis of the colonized subject who seeks validation through assimilation into the culture of the colonizer but experiences self-division and psychological fragmentation. Sai, the judge's granddaughter, represents a different generation negotiating the legacy of colonialism. Educated in a convent school and exposed to Western literature and values, she inhabits a hybrid cultural space. Unlike the judge, she does not entirely reject her Indian identity, yet she also is not fully identified with traditional social expectations. Her relationship with Gyan, a Nepali tutor involved in the Gorkhaland movement, reveals the tensions between personal intimacy and political identity. Through Sai, Desai illustrates how younger postcolonial subjects inherit colonial structures without necessarily accepting them, creating a more ambivalent and fluid form of hybridity.

The novel therefore presents Kalimpong as a contact zone where multiple cultures, languages, and histories intersect. However, these intersections are not equal exchanges; they are shaped by the enduring hierarchies established during colonial rule.

Diaspora, Migration, and Displacement:

One of the novel's most powerful critiques of multiculturalism emerges through the story of Biju, the son of the judge's cook, who migrates to New York in search of economic opportunity. His experiences expose the precarious reality of undocumented immigrants in the global West. Contrary to the idealized image of America as a multicultural land of opportunity, Biju encounters exploitation, insecurity, and constant fear of deportation. Biju moves between a series of restaurant kitchens representing different national cuisines—French, Indian, Pakistani, Chinese, and Mexican. These spaces appear multicultural on the surface, yet the workers who sustain them remain economically marginalized and socially invisible. Desai reveals the irony that multicultural cities often celebrate ethnic food and cultural diversity while ignoring the labor conditions of immigrant workers. Biju's identity becomes fragmented as he navigates different linguistic and cultural environments without achieving genuine belonging in any of them.

His undocumented status intensifies this sense of displacement. He is not access legal protection, stable employment, or social recognition, and his existence is marked by constant

mobility and insecurity. This reflects the limitations of official multicultural discourse, which may acknowledge cultural diversity but frequently fails to protect those who occupy the most vulnerable positions within the migration system. Biju's invisibility demonstrates that multiculturalism co-exist with severe forms of exclusion when economic and legal structures deny migrants full participation in society.

Class, Culture, and Internalized Colonial Hierarchies:

Desai's critique of multiculturalism is inseparable from her analysis of class. The novel repeatedly demonstrates that access to cultural mobility is unevenly distributed. The judge's Anglicized identity is not simply a matter of personal preference; it is tied to education, bureaucratic power, and social status. His fluency in English and adherence to British cultural norms become markers of elite distinction within Indian society. This internalization of colonial superiority is evident in his contempt for local customs, languages, and people. He values proximity to whiteness and Western culture while distancing himself from his own community. Homi K. Bhabha's concept of mimicry is particularly relevant here: the judge imitates the colonizer in dress, speech, and behavior, becoming "*almost the same, but not quite*." His mimicry never grants him full acceptance in the colonial world, and the resulting frustration contributes to his emotional isolation and cruelty toward others.

Sai's relationship to hybridity is more complex. She embodies a generation shaped by globalization rather than direct colonial rule. Her education exposes her to multiple cultural traditions, and she moves between English and Indian worlds with relative ease. However, this flexibility does not eliminate uncertainty. Her ambivalence reflects the experience of many postcolonial subjects who inherit contradictory cultural values and must negotiate identity across competing frameworks of modernity, nationalism, and global consumer culture.

Global Inequalities and the Limits of Multiculturalism:

A central argument of *The Inheritance of Loss* is that multiculturalism is not separated from global economic inequality. The novel connects the struggles of characters in Kalimpong with those of migrants in New York, revealing how both are affected by unequal distributions of wealth, power, and mobility. Globalization creates the appearance of interconnectedness, but Desai shows that people do not move through the world under equal conditions. Biju's exploitation in America contrasts sharply with the lifestyles of transnational elites who travel, study, and work across borders with relative ease. Similarly, the political unrest in Kalimpong is rooted in ethnic identity and in economic marginalization and unequal access to resources. The Gorkhaland movement emerges from a history of exclusion, demonstrating that demands for recognition are often intertwined with material grievances.

Racial discrimination further undermines the promise of multicultural inclusion. Immigrants in the novel are frequently categorized according to stereotypes associated with their nationality, accent, or skin color. Even in supposedly cosmopolitan spaces, racial hierarchies continue to structure social interactions and opportunities. Desai therefore challenges the assumption that globalization naturally produces tolerance and equality.

The title *The Inheritance of Loss* itself encapsulates this critique. What the characters inherit is simply cultural diversity and the losses produced by colonialism, migration, and unequal globalization: loss of home, language, dignity, certainty, and belonging. Multiculturalism, in this context, appears as an incomplete and often fragile ideal that is continually undermined by economic disparity, racial prejudice, and historical power relations.

Conclusion:

Global English literature demonstrates that multiculturalism is a seamless coexistence and a contested terrain shaped by colonial histories, migration, and identity politics. *The Buddha of Suburbia* foregrounds hybridity and performance as strategies of survival in Britain's racialized landscape, while *The Inheritance of Loss* exposes the fragility of multicultural belonging amid global inequalities.

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