

### Struggles for Fitness: Identity, Adaptation, and Resistance in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* & *My Son the Fanatic*

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**Abstract:** *This paper explores how Hanif Kureishi's The Buddha of Suburbia and My Son the Fanatic depict the challenges of identity, adaptation, and resistance within postcolonial British society. Focusing on how characters navigate the pressures of cultural assimilation, generational conflict, and social mobility, the study examines the broader implications of conformity, self-presentation, and opposition to dominant norms. Through close textual analysis, the paper reveals how Kureishi analyzes a system that privileges cultural alignment and penalizes difference, offering insight into the experiences of individuals negotiating complex personal and societal expectations. By highlighting the struggles faced by characters in their pursuit of belonging and recognition, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of identity formation and cultural negotiation in contemporary multicultural contexts.*

**Keywords:** Struggles, fitness, identity, adaptation, resistance, postcolonial society, cultural assimilation, social mobility

#### Introduction

Hanif Kureishi's fiction provides a compelling commentary on the intersections of race, class, and identity in postcolonial Britain. As a British author of Pakistani descent, Kureishi brings a unique voice to the discourse surrounding multiculturalism and assimilation. His works frequently explore the complexities faced by individuals who straddle multiple cultural identities, particularly in a society that favors conformity to the dominant white, Western norms. Therefore, this paper aims to investigate the role of Social Darwinism: a theory that asserts societal progress occurs through the survival and dominance of the fittest individuals or groups in shaping the narratives and character arcs in Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *My Son the Fanatic*. Through this lens, it becomes evident that characters such as Karim, Parvez, and Ali are engaged in ongoing battles for recognition, survival, and self-assertion within a society that often equates success with assimilation. The analysis shows how these characters either adapt to or resist societal pressures and the consequences that follow. Through the lens of 'survival of the fittest,' the characters navigate the complex terrain of identity, cultural adaptation, and socio-economic competition. The paper examines themes of conformity, resistance, self-presentation, and economic struggle, arguing that Kureishi offers a comprehensive critique of a society that rewards assimilation and marginalizes difference.

## Thesis Statement

In *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *My Son the Fanatic*, Hanif Kureishi employs the lens of Social Darwinism to analyze the socio-cultural and economic pressures faced by immigrant characters in postcolonial Britain, illustrating how adaptation and resistance serve as complex strategies for identity negotiation and survival.

## Research Questions

- 1) How does Hanif Kureishi represent Social Darwinism in *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *My Son the Fanatic*?
- 2) What does Kureishi's portrayal of adaptation and resistance reveal about identity formation and social mobility in a multicultural context?

## Research Objectives

- 1) To examine the representation of Social Darwinism in Kureishi's novels.
- 2) To analyze how adaptation and resistance function as survival strategies for immigrant characters.

## Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its interdisciplinary approach, combining literary analysis with social theory to unpack the embedded ideologies in Kureishi's work. It contributes to the field of postcolonial literature by highlighting the lived realities of immigrants in Western societies, particularly within the context of Britain's colonial legacy and its lingering effects on cultural identity. Furthermore, the study engages with contemporary debates on integration, multiculturalism, and the notion of meritocracy. It also provides educators, scholars, and policymakers with a detailed understanding of how literature can reflect and analyze the systemic inequalities present in modern multicultural societies.

## Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative textual analysis approach, closely examining the primary texts: *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *My Son the Fanatic*. Passages are analyzed for thematic significance, character development, and narrative techniques that relate to the concept of Social Darwinism. The analysis is grounded in theoretical frameworks from cultural studies, postcolonial theory, and sociology. Key theoretical influences include Herbert Spencer's and Richard Hofstadter's writings on Social Darwinism, Homi Bhabha's theories of hybridity and third space, and Erving Goffman's concept of impression management. Secondary sources include scholarly articles, critical essays, and reviews of Kureishi's works, which help contextualize the primary texts within broader cultural and academic discussions. This interdisciplinary methodology ensures a comprehensive understanding of the texts and the social theories they engage.

## Literature Review

The study builds upon a body of scholarship that addresses identity, multiculturalism, and resistance in postcolonial literature. Homi Bhabha's concept of the 'third space' is particularly relevant to Karim's identity negotiation in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, as it encapsulates the fluid, liminal space inhabited by individuals who belong to multiple cultural spheres. Stuart Hall's insights into cultural identity also inform the analysis of how characters redefine themselves in opposition to or in acceptance of dominant cultural norms.

Scholars have acknowledged Kureishi's contribution to debates on British multiculturalism, often noting his critical stance on assimilation and his exploration of sexual, cultural, and generational conflicts. However, relatively few studies have applied the framework of Social Darwinism to Kureishi's work. This gap in the literature is significant, given the thematic relevance of competition,

conformity, and resistance in his fiction. By integrating Social Darwinism into the discussion, this paper adds a new dimension to the understanding of Kureishi's critique of British society.

### Analysis

Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *My Son the Fanatic* vividly demonstrate how Social Darwinism functions not merely as a biological or economic framework, but as a sociocultural force shaping the lived experiences of postcolonial subjects in Britain. In both novels, Kureishi's characters struggle with the imperative to adapt or resist in order to survive within a society structured by race, class, and cultural hegemony.

In *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Karim's mixed-race identity places him in a liminal space where his success is contingent on his ability to conform to the expectations of a predominantly white, middle-class society. His journey through the world of theatre and entertainment reveals the performative demands of cultural assimilation. Karim's willingness to play stereotypical roles, including those that exoticize his background, underscores the commodification of racial identity under the guise of multicultural acceptance. He oscillates between roles, both literal and metaphorical, that reflect the pressures to adapt in order to be socially and professionally viable. The Social Darwinist notion of survival through adaptation is thus exposed as not only a matter of skill or intelligence, but also of strategic self-erasure and cultural compromise.

Conversely, in *My Son the Fanatic*, Parvez's fervent desire to integrate into British society through economic means epitomizes the immigrant's pursuit of the 'fitness' required to thrive. His embrace of western consumerism, symbolized by his new car, his aspirations for his son, and his detachment from traditional practices, reflects a belief in assimilation as a path to survival. However, this form of adaptation leads to internal conflict and familial discord, particularly as his son Ali radically rejects these values in favor of religious fundamentalism. Ali's resistance, although extreme, serves as a counter-narrative to the dominant ideology of adaptation. For him, survival is not about conformity but about reclaiming a spiritual and cultural identity that the western world attempts to dilute.

Both texts critique the underlying assumptions of Social Darwinism. Karim's and Parvez's adaptations do not result in unambiguous success; instead, they lead to psychological fragmentation and interpersonal alienation. Similarly, Ali's resistance disrupts the family unit, suggesting that both adaptation and defiance incur costs. Kureishi challenges the binary of "fit" versus 'unfit' by illustrating the fluid, negotiated, and often contradictory processes through which individuals attempt to assert their identities. This analysis reveals that, in Kureishi's fiction, survival is not purely a Darwinian contest but a complex interplay of cultural negotiation, resistance, and self-assertion.

### Conclusion

Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *My Son the Fanatic* critically interrogate the assumptions of Social Darwinism in postcolonial Britain. These narratives depict a complex terrain where identity, social status, and economic survival are negotiated through adaptation and resistance. Karim's and Parvez's attempts to assimilate into British society are met with varying degrees of success and emotional cost, while Ali's ideological resistance points to a deeper critique of Western materialism and moral decay. In highlighting these dynamics, Kureishi does more than tell the story of immigrants in Britain; he exposes the limitations of a social order built on competition and conformity. Ultimately, this study concludes that Kureishi's characters demonstrate that survival in a multicultural society cannot be reduced to mere adaptation. Rather, it involves a continuous negotiation of self, culture, and community. By portraying this complexity, Kureishi invites readers to reconsider the meaning of 'fitness' in a world where cultural difference should be seen as a strength rather than a weakness.

Characters like Karim and Parvez experience identity fragmentation as a consequence of adapting to societal norms. Their efforts to succeed often come at the cost of alienation from their cultural roots and

psychological well-being.

Ali's rejection of Western values and Karim's refusal to be boxed into a single racial or cultural identity illustrate resistance as a meaningful, though difficult, form of agency. Their actions challenge the presumed benefits of assimilation and highlight the value of alternative paths to self-realization.

Both novels expose the deep-seated racial and class-based inequalities embedded in British society. Success is shown to be contingent not only on effort but also on race, social capital, and conformity to white British norms. Kureishi undermines the myth of meritocracy by demonstrating that opportunities are often dictated by existing power structures. The characters' struggles reveal that merit alone does not ensure social mobility, especially for those who exist on the margins of society. Thus, Kureishi's body of work demonstrates that adaptation should not be viewed as a universal remedy for the challenges faced by marginalized individuals. Rather, his narratives reveal that resistance, despite its inherent difficulties, can serve as a potent and meaningful means of asserting identity and preserving personal and cultural integrity.

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