



Postcolonial echoes and diasporic hybridity: A comparative analysis of identity negotiation in selected south Asian and Caribbean anglophone fiction

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Abstract

Background: Postcolonial literary theory has long grappled with the question of how formerly colonised subjects negotiate identity within metropolitan and diasporic spaces. Anglophone fiction from South Asia and the Caribbean offers particularly fertile comparative terrain, as both traditions share colonial histories while retaining distinct cultural, linguistic, and geographic specificities.

Objective: This study undertakes a comparative close reading of selected novels from South Asian and Caribbean Anglophone literary traditions, analysing how authors deploy narrative strategies of hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence as theorised by Homi Bhabha to dramatise the diasporic experience of identity negotiation in postcolonial contexts.

Method: A qualitative comparative textual analysis grounded in postcolonial theory, particularly Homi Bhabha's concepts of the 'third space,' mimicry, and hybridity, and Stuart Hall's theorisation of diasporic identity, was applied to a purposively selected corpus of six novels (three South Asian, three Caribbean). Close reading, discourse analysis, and intertextual comparison constitute the primary analytical methods.

Key Results: The analysis reveals convergent patterns: both traditions employ code-switching as a literary device to mark the liminal subject position of diasporic protagonists; both utilise unreliable narration to destabilise singular, essentialist identity claims; and both dramatise the generational fracture between first and second-generation immigrant characters as the primary site of identity conflict. Divergences emerge in the treatment of religion and the body as loci of cultural negotiation.

Conclusion: Postcolonial Anglophone fiction from South Asia and the Caribbean engages in parallel yet distinct dialogues with imperial legacies, contributing to global literary discourses on belonging, displacement, and the politics of cultural translation.

Keywords: Postcolonial literature, diasporic identity, hybridity, third space, South Asian fiction, Caribbean fiction, Bhabha

Introduction

The postcolonial literary imagination is inescapably preoccupied with questions of origin, exile, and the contested terrain of cultural belonging^[1]. As empire receded from South Asia and the Caribbean through the mid-twentieth century, it left in its wake not only political vacuums but profoundly fractured subjectivities identities shaped simultaneously by indigenous traditions and metropolitan impositions. The Anglophone literary traditions that emerged from these contexts bear the indelible imprint of this dual inheritance, deploying the coloniser's language to narrate the colonised subject's experience—what Ngugi wa Thiong'o famously termed the 'language of the oppressor' while simultaneously transforming that language into an instrument of cultural recovery and political critique^[2].

Postcolonial theory, from Frantz Fanon's foundational psychoanalytic accounts of colonial subjectification^[3] through Edward Said's Orientalist critique^[4] to Homi Bhabha's poststructuralist reconceptualisation of colonial discourse^[5], has provided literary scholars with an evolving theoretical vocabulary for understanding these negotiations. Bhabha's contributions are particularly germane to the present study: his concept of the 'third space of enunciation' describes the interstitial cultural zone in which diasporic subjects forge hybrid identities that are neither assimilated to the host culture nor straightforwardly continuous with a romanticised homeland. This in-between positioning,

marked by what Bhabha terms 'mimicry' the colonial subject's performance of metropolitan norms that always contains an ironic 'almost but not quite' dimension^[6] generates the central dramatic tension in much diasporic fiction.

Comparative literary scholarship has historically treated South Asian and Caribbean Anglophone traditions in relative isolation, despite their substantial shared postcolonial inheritance^[7]. The present study addresses this comparative gap by examining how six selected novels three from each tradition mobilise parallel and divergent literary strategies to dramatise the experience of diasporic identity negotiation. The guiding research questions are:

RQ1: What narrative and stylistic strategies do South Asian and Caribbean Anglophone novelists employ to represent the liminal identity positions of diasporic protagonists?

RQ2: In what ways do Bhabha's concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and the third space manifest across both literary traditions, and where do significant divergences emerge?

RQ3: How does generational difference function as a structural device for exploring cultural identity conflict in the selected texts?

By addressing these questions, this study contributes to both comparative postcolonial literary scholarship and to ongoing theoretical refinements in the study of diasporic cultural production.

Literature review

1. Postcolonial theory and literary analysis

Postcolonial theory emerged as a distinct disciplinary formation in the 1980s, drawing on anti-colonial political thought, psychoanalysis, and poststructuralism [8]. Fanon's [3] analysis of the racialised colonial psyche established the foundational premise that colonialism constitutes not merely an economic and political system but a structure of violent psychological domination that deforms the subjectivity of both coloniser and colonised. Said's [4] Orientalism demonstrated how Western literary and scholarly representations construct the non-Western 'Other' as a foil against which European identity defines itself, revealing the constitutive relationship between knowledge, power, and colonial representation.

Bhabha's [5] intervention, building on Derrida's deconstruction and Lacan's psychoanalysis, shifted the analytical focus from binary oppositions (coloniser/colonised, centre/periphery) toward the ambivalent, hybrid spaces generated by colonial encounter. For Bhabha, colonial discourse is never monolithic: the colonised subject's performance of colonial norms introduces a subtle but irreducible difference a 'slippage' that unsettles the authority it appears to affirm [6]. This theoretical insight has proven enormously generative for literary analysis, enabling readings of postcolonial texts that attend to irony, parody, and subversive mimicry within apparently assimilationist narratives.

2. Diasporic identity in south Asian anglophone fiction

South Asian Anglophone fiction—particularly that produced by diasporic writers—has attracted substantial scholarly attention since the 1980s, driven partly by the global success of authors such as Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee, and Hanif Kureishi [9]. Scholars have traced recurrent preoccupations with partition and its traumatic afterlives [10], the negotiation of arranged marriage and romantic love across cultural divides, the Islamophobic and racist textures of British and North American life, and the complex politics of nostalgia for a homeland never directly experienced by second-generation migrants [11]. Rushdie's formulation of the migrant as a figure who occupies 'an out-of-country' position seeing old places through new eyes and vice versa [12] has been particularly influential in shaping critical approaches.

3. Caribbean anglophone fiction and the politics of creolisation

Caribbean Anglophone literary traditions are shaped by the distinctive histories of plantation slavery, indentured labour,

and the Creolisation processes through which new cultural forms emerged from colonial contact zones [13]. Édouard Glissant's concept of 'Relation'—the open-ended, rhizomatic interweaving of cultural differences without hierarchy or synthesis [14]—has been productively applied to Caribbean literary production, where hybridity is not merely an analytical category but a lived cultural reality encoded in language (Creole), religion (Vodou, Obeah), and everyday practice. Derek Walcott's literary mediation between European classicism and Caribbean folk culture exemplifies what Simon Gikandi has called the 'double inheritance' of the Caribbean writer [15].

4. Comparative postcolonial scholarship and research gap

Despite rich individual traditions of postcolonial literary scholarship on South Asian and Caribbean fictions, genuinely comparative studies remain relatively rare [7]. Scholars such as Elleke Boehmer [16] and Elleke Boehmer and Moore-Gilbert [17] have called for more sustained cross-regional postcolonial comparativism, arguing that the field's tendency toward geographic specialization has obscured important convergences and productive divergences. The present study responds to this call by placing six novels in sustained critical dialogue.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative comparative textual analysis as its primary methodology, supplemented by discourse analysis and intertextual comparison. This approach is appropriate for humanistic literary inquiry because it enables close, sustained engagement with the formal and thematic dimensions of literary texts while contextualising them within broader theoretical and historical frameworks.

1. Corpus Selection

Six novels were purposively selected to ensure representation of canonical and contemporary voices, gender diversity among authors, and thematic breadth within each regional tradition. Selection criteria included: (a) status as Anglophone novels by authors identifying with the respective regional diaspora; (b) centrality of diasporic identity negotiation as a thematic concern; and (c) availability of secondary scholarship enabling contextualised interpretation. The corpus comprises three South Asian Anglophone texts and three Caribbean Anglophone texts. Specific titles are referenced as [Novel A–F] in this training sample to avoid copyright concerns; practitioners should substitute real titles per their research design.

Table 1: Corpus of Selected Novels for Comparative Analysis (Illustrative Placeholder)

#	Novel (Placeholder)	Author (Placeholder)	Region	Key Thematic Focus
1	[Novel A]	[Author A]	South Asia	Partition; nationalism
2	[Novel B]	[Author B]	South Asian Diaspora	Generational conflict; London
3	[Novel C]	[Author C]	South Asian Diaspora	Gender; religious identity
4	[Novel D]	[Author D]	Caribbean	Slavery's afterlife; memory
5	[Novel E]	[Author E]	Caribbean Diaspora	Creolisation; language
6	[Novel F]	[Author F]	Caribbean Diaspora	Race; metropolitan encounter

Note. Placeholder titles and authors to be replaced with real corpus texts in authentic research.

2. Analytical Framework

Close reading focused on: (a) narrative voice and focalization; (b) code-switching and linguistic hybridity; (c)

figuration of the body and material culture; (d) structuring of generational relationships; and (e) representations of spatial movement between homeland and diaspora. Each

novel was read twice: first holistically for narrative structure and thematic orientation, then analytically with specific attention to passages and motifs illuminating the research questions. Cross-text patterns were identified through thematic coding and documented in analytical matrices.

Results and discussion

1. Code-switching as liminal literary practice

Across all six novels in the corpus, code-switching the alternation between standard metropolitan English and regional, creolised, or heritage-language forms functions

as a primary literary device for representing the split subjectivity of diasporic protagonists. This linguistic splitting enacts at the formal level the 'double consciousness' that Du Bois originally theorised in the African-American context and that postcolonial scholars have extended to a broader range of colonial subjects. In the South Asian texts, Urdu, Hindi, and regional vernacular terms are strategically embedded within English prose, often without translation, enacting an exclusion of the monolingual metropolitan reader that mirrors the exclusion experienced by the protagonist in the host society.

Table 2: Comparative Summary of Key Narrative Strategies Across the Corpus (Analytical Matrix)

Narrative Strategy	Novel A	Novel B	Novel C	Novel D	Novel E–F
Code-switching	Central	Central	Moderate	Central	Central
Unreliable narration	Present	Strong	Present	Strong	Moderate
Generational conflict structuring	Moderate	Central	Central	Moderate	Strong
Body as identity site	Strong	Moderate	Central	Central	Strong
Religious negotiation	Central	Moderate	Central	Present	Moderate
Spatial oscillation (home/diaspora)	Moderate	Strong	Moderate	Strong	Central

Note: Analytical ratings (Central / Strong / Moderate / Present) are qualitative scholarly judgements.

2. Mimicry, Mockery, and the Almost-But-Not-Quite

Bhabha's ^[5] formulation of colonial mimicry as 'almost the same but not quite' finds vivid literary embodiment across the corpus. In the South Asian texts, male protagonists who have acquired metropolitan education and professional credentials discover, upon arrival in Britain or North America, that their mimicry of metropolitan norms secures them neither full social acceptance nor psychological wholeness. The irony is formally encoded through free

indirect discourse that allows readers access to the gap between protagonists' self-presentation and their inner experience of exclusion and bewilderment. Caribbean texts explore mimicry through a related but inflected lens: the legacies of plantation culture, where the performed adoption of colonial manners by enslaved and colonised populations was simultaneously a survival strategy and a covert site of resistance, surface in contemporary diasporic narratives as a structural inheritance.

Table 3: Manifestations of Bhabha's Key Concepts Across Regional Traditions (Schematic Comparison)

Theoretical Concept	South Asian Fiction Manifestation	Caribbean Fiction Manifestation
Third Space	Metropolitan flat / café as neither homeland nor host culture	Creole linguistic space between English and heritage language
Mimicry	Professional acculturation with private ethnic identity maintenance	Performance of colonial civility as inherited survival strategy
Hybridity	Cuisine, dress, and marriage practices as negotiated synthesis	Creolised cultural practice as constitutive rather than derivative
Ambivalence	Simultaneous attraction to and alienation from 'home' culture	Double-valenced relationship with colonial past and postcolonial present

Note. Schematic representations; detailed textual evidence presented in analytical discussion.

3. Generational Fracture as Structural Device

Across both traditions, the generational relationship between first-generation migrants and their UK/North American-born or -raised children constitutes the primary structural site of identity conflict. First-generation characters typically embody what Hall ^[18] calls the 'politics of identity' asserting fixed, essential cultural origins as a defensive strategy against metropolitan dislocation. Second-generation characters occupy the third space more fully, their identity constitutively hybrid, their relationship to the homeland mediated entirely through narrative (parental stories, diasporic community rituals, heritage-language classes) rather than lived experience. This generational dynamic generates the novels' central dramatic tensions, with the formal device of the bildungsroman—adapted and creolised—serving as the narrative container for protagonists' identity development trajectories.

Conclusion

This comparative study has demonstrated that South Asian and Caribbean Anglophone fictions share a common

postcolonial literary imagination one that deploys code-switching, unreliable narration, and generational conflict as formal mechanisms for representing the liminal, hybrid subjectivities produced by diasporic experience. At the same time, significant divergences emerge: South Asian texts tend to foreground the specificities of religious and caste identity as sites of cultural negotiation, while Caribbean texts draw more explicitly on the creolisation traditions rooted in the plantation's legacy. These divergences, far from undermining comparative analysis, enrich it by demonstrating that postcolonial hybridity is not a homogeneous or universally applicable concept but a family of related but regionally specific cultural formations. Theoretically, these findings suggest that Bhabha's framework of the third space, mimicry, and hybridity retains significant explanatory power across diverse postcolonial literary contexts, while requiring supplementation by regional-specific frameworks Glissant's Relation for the Caribbean, partition and communal memory discourses for South Asia to achieve full analytical depth. For literary pedagogy, the comparative approach modelled here offers a

productive framework for graduate seminars in World Anglophone Literature that seek to move beyond both Eurocentrism and the fragmentation of postcolonial literatures into isolated national canons.

Future research should expand the corpus to include women-authored texts in greater proportion, incorporate reader-response dimensions through empirical audience studies, and extend the comparative frame to include East African and Pacific Island Anglophone traditions.

Ethical Statement

This article constitutes an original academic writing sample produced for formatting practice and educational purposes. All analytical arguments are the original scholarly work of the author(s). Primary texts cited are placeholders in this training version; real research would cite specific published novels. No fabricated author identities or institutions are represented. This article must not be submitted to any journal without replacement of all placeholders with genuine research content.

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