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Neurodivergent Consciousness and Post Colonial Survival: A Comparative Study of on Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous and The Buddha of Suburbia

Shubhrashivangi Tiwary

Undergraduate Student, Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University

Abstract

Postcolonial literature has long explored identity instability, displacement, and fragmentation as outcomes of migration and empire. Recent advances in trauma theory, neuroqueer rhetoric, and cognitive literary studies, however, offer new frameworks for understanding these disruptions as formal inscriptions of altered cognitive processes shaped by historical violence rather than merely symbolic representations of cultural dislocation. This research examines how neurodivergent awareness appears as an adaptive survival strategy in postcolonial situations by contrasting Ocean Vuong's On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous with Hanif Kureishi's The Buddha of Suburbia. The narrative consciousnesses of the protagonists in both novels depart from the accepted standards of stability, linear temporality, and consistency. Using sensory fragmentation and nonlinear perception, Little Dog, a Vietnamese American narrator impacted by migration, domestic violence, and inherited war trauma, investigates memory and identity. Karim Amir, a British-Indian narrator, uses attentional mobility, performative multiplicity, and adaptive self-construction to negotiate racialised urban modernity.

Despite the historical and geographical differences, both protagonists display comparable cognitive survival techniques, including hypervigilance, masking, sensory amplification, and narrative disruption. These narrative styles display the neurological imprint of postcolonial precarity by rejecting linear narrative patterns associated with imperial history and unified subjectivity. This study suggests that, rather than being viewed as a medical condition, neurodivergence in these texts should be viewed as historically established adaptive cognition. By examining how trauma, racialization, and displacement reconfigure perception, attention, and memory, the study reframes narrative fragmentation as cognitive transcription rather than creative invention. Ultimately, the study demonstrates how both novels develop distinct narrative structures that reflect the emergence of postcolonial awareness, shedding light on how living in vulnerable circumstances leads to innovative ways of seeing, thinking, and speaking.

Keywords: Narrative Fragmentation, Neurodivergence, Postcolonial Trauma, Hybridity, Neuro-queer Rhetoric

Introduction

Postcolonial literature has addressed the psychological impacts of cultural displacement, migration, and empire. Alienation, fractured belonging, and identity instability are common problems for postcolonial

characters. In the past, literary criticism has explained similar experiences using sociological and symbolic frameworks, viewing fragmentation as a metaphor for cultural loss or identity crisis. However, interdisciplinary developments in trauma studies, cognitive literary theory, and neuroqueer rhetoric allow for a more realistic understanding of how historical violence affects not just identity but also cognition itself. These approaches suggest that tale shape may function as a transcription of altered neurological and perceptual systems impacted by unstable surroundings.

Empire was not just a political and economic structure; it was also a cognitive and perceptual one. In addition to land, colonial power influenced identity, categorisation, and perception. The rigid categorisation systems it enforced, self against other, coloniser vs colonised, and civilised versus savage, affected people's views of themselves and their place in the world. Postcolonial people not only inherit these categorisation schemes, but they also inhabit environments that challenge them. Cognitive dissonance, attentional instability, and adaptive multiplicity are the outcomes of this. Identity becomes flexible as both a cultural representation and a physiological requirement.

In this context, neurodivergence provides a helpful conceptual framework for understanding postcolonial consciousness. Neurodiversity is the term used to describe differences in cognitive processing, including attention, sensory perception, emotional regulation, and identity development. Neurodivergence can be seen as an adaptive response to environmental stimuli, even though it is often addressed in medical situations. Threat, instability, and uncertainty alter cognitive processes. Hypervigilance, sensory sensitivity, attentional mobility, and identity fluidity may be survival tactics rather than maladaptive traits. Ocean Vuong's On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous and Hanif Kureishi's The Buddha of Suburbia are two very powerful literary representations of this phenomenon. The primary protagonists in both novels reside in racially heated environments characterised by surveillance, instability, and relocation. Their narrative consciousness does not satisfy the traditional realism presumptions of linearity, coherence, and unified identity. Little Dog, who has experienced trauma from war and migration, uses sensory fragmentation and nonlinear memory to detect consciousness. Karim Amir, who employs performative multiplicity and adaptive identity formation to experience consciousness, has been affected by racialization in metropolitan Britain.

This study suggests that these narrative interruptions illustrate postcolonial-influenced neurodivergent cognition. Instead of seeing fragmentation and multiplicity as psychological deficiencies, the research reframes them as adaptive cognitive processes that developed in response to historical violence and societal instability.

Literature Review

Postcolonial theory enables us to comprehend the instability of identity in colonial and postcolonial contexts, particularly in relation to how power modifies subjectivity on the perceptual and psychological levels. One of the most important contributions is Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity, which fundamentally challenges essentialist and inflexible ideas of identity. Bhabha argues that postcolonial individuals do not simply transition between cultural identities; rather, they exist in liminal spaces where identities are continually contested. This "in-between" area undermines the idea of cultural purity by defining identity as a process rather than a fixed condition. Hybridity creates ambivalence, plurality, and flexibility, allowing individuals to adapt to shifting cultural and political forces. Importantly, hybridity is not a sign of psychological weakness or disintegration but rather a helpful survival tactic in environments

formed by colonial power, migration, and cultural displacement. It symbolises a consciousness that has perfected the capacity to operate simultaneously across several symbolic systems.

The works of Frantz Fanon have shed significant light on the psychological and neurological ramifications of colonial racialization. In Black Skin, White Masks, Fanon describes how colonial people develop what he calls a divided or "double" consciousness as a result of absorbing the coloniser's racialising gaze. The racialised person becomes extremely conscious of their body, voice, and behaviour, always predicting how they will be seen by dominant social structures. This illness is characterised by increased self-monitoring, attention, and identity instability. Fanon claims that colonisation not only imposes external political domination but also modifies internal perceptions and cognitive processes. The subject learns to live simultaneously as self and object, which creates a persistent cognitive conflict. Current theories of cognitive adaptation in the setting of continuous monitoring, in which power dynamics affect perception itself, are foreshadowed by Fanon's insights.

Trauma theory, which examines how violence modifies neurological and cognitive processes, expands on this strategy. Scholars such as Cathy Caruth and Bessel van der Kolk demonstrate how traumatised memory differs from the conventional chronological framework. Trauma is documented through physical sensations, involuntary recollection, and sensory pieces rather than as a coherent narrative. According to Van der Kolk, traumatic experiences hinder the brain's capacity to integrate memories into linear temporal sequences, leading to nonlinear perception and heightened sensory awareness. Instead of viewing the past as a distant past, trauma survivors often see it as an ongoing physical present. As a result, cognitive habits become fragmented, hypervigilant, and attentionally unstable. Trauma, therefore, modifies emotional experience as well as the fundamental anatomy of the brain.

Neuro-queer theory, particularly Melanie Yergeau's work, provides further insight by challenging accepted notions of coherence, rationality, and cognitive stability. According to Yergeau, Western cultural systems promote neurotypical cognitive functions as universal measures of personality, including narrative coherence, emotional regulation, and linear thinking. Cognitive diversity, such as fragmentation, plurality, sensory intensity, and attentional mobility, is often pathologised by these paradigms. Neuro-queer theory reframes such diversity as an alternative neurological configuration rather than a flaw. Instead of seeing literary fragmentation and nonlinear narration as examples of narrative coherence failing, this perspective allows us to see them as expressions of different cognitive rhythms.

Cognitive literary studies further emphasise the link between mental processes and narrative form. Narrative structure reflects the way awareness organises attention, memory, and perception. An interruption in memory integration or a shift in temporal perception may be indicated by fragmented or nonlinear narratives. As a result, literary form becomes a channel for expression that exposes cognitive architecture.

Compared with these theoretical advancements, comparatively little research has examined the specific ways in which neurodivergent cognitive processes interact with postcolonial settings. While much postcolonial critique focuses on identity, language, and power, neurodivergent theory has frequently remained within the contexts of medical or disability studies. This work bridges this gap by demonstrating how narrative structure in contemporary postcolonial literature reflects adaptive cognitive processes impacted by displacement, trauma, and racialization. By integrating postcolonial theory, trauma studies, and neuro-queer theory, this study reframes plurality and fragmentation as representations of historically and neurologically constructed forms of consciousness rather than as aesthetic abstraction.

Comparative Analysis: Cognitive Architectures of Survival

A comparative reading of The Buddha of Suburbia and On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous reveals that, despite their different historical and geopolitical contexts, both novels produce protagonists whose cognitive processes function as adaptive survival mechanisms within racialised and unstable environments. Racial monitoring, displacement, and violence are features of Little Dog and Karim Amir's surroundings that challenge normative subjectivity. Their story awareness differs markedly from the coherence, continuity, and psychological unity required by realists. However, this discrepancy does not suggest a problem. Rather, it stands for cognitive adaptability, a distinct neuronal structure that is affected by prior trauma and social precariousness.

The directionality of cognitive energy is the primary distinction between the two main characters. Little Dog has implosive cognition, influenced by migration, intergenerational violence, and inherited war trauma. His story is introspective and is arranged according to sensory intensity and associative memory rather than chronologically. The line between self and other is quickly thrown off balance by the novel's opening statement, "I am writing you from inside a body that used to be yours" (Vuong 3). This statement illustrates how historical inheritance and parental trauma have affected leaky identity formation. The self appears as a relational extension rather than as an independent entity. Even subjectivity is passed down through generations.

The neurological effects of trauma are further demonstrated by Little Dog's perception of memory. "Memory is a choice," he notes. However, you would know it's a flood if you were God (Vuong 82). The breakdown of executive control over memory caused by trauma is encapsulated in this metaphor. Memory is an involuntary sensory invasion rather than a coherent story. Temporal distance collapses when the past physiologically returns. Trauma is a persistent neurological condition rather than a finished event. This temporal collapse is a reflection of embodied recall, as defined by trauma theory, the encroachment of emotional and sensory elements without narrative mediation.

This implosive cognition leads to hypersensitivity to sensory details. Little Dog values texture, sound, scent, and tactile proximity over abstract interpretation. These tactile subtleties demonstrate how sensory experience may serve as a stabilising anchor amid cognitive dispersion. The universe is absorbed through sensation rather than narrative coherence. Trauma disrupts temporal continuity, heightens consciousness, and changes experience itself. Sensory attention becomes a survival tool, enabling orientation in difficult psychological terrain.

In contrast, Karim Amir's thinking in The Buddha of Suburbia is explosive rather than implosive. Karim's awareness grows forth into performance, plurality, and adaptive role-shifting, whereas Little Dog's mind contracts inside. Identity is instantly undermined by his well-known opening statement, "I am an Englishman born and bred, almost" (Kureishi 3). The qualifier "almost" exposes belonging as socially created and conditional rather than innate. Karim lives in the space between acceptance and rejection. Adaptive multiplicity results from this instability. As a suburban son, racial outsider, actor, sexual experimenter, and cultural mediator, Karim manages several social roles at once. Depending on the situation, his identity changes. Karim acknowledges the artificiality of racial acting when he is placed in racially stereotypical roles. He muses, ‘This was him laughing, I was certain.‘Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!’ He said,‘What a breed ofpeople two hundred years of imperialism has given birth to. If the pioneers from the East India Company could see you. What puzzlement there’d be. Everyone looks at you, I’m sure, and thinks: an Indian boy, how exotic, how interesting, what stories of aunties and elephants we’ll hear now from him. And you’re from Orpington.’ (Kureishi 141) He still acts out the accent, though. The contrast

between one's inner identity and one's outward performance is evident at this point. Karim becomes both a self-observer and an actor.

This cognitive divide is an example of continuous self-monitoring under racial surveillance. To operate in exclusionary situations, Karim must continuously adjust his tone, demeanour, and feelings. He rapidly shifts between social positions, emotional registers, and locales in his narrative voice, demonstrating attentional mobility. Rather than maintaining a stable identity, Karim survives by continuously adjusting his mental processes.

Despite these opposing paths, implosion vs explosion, the two primary protagonists share postcolonial precarity-influenced cognitive survival methods. Both of them are quite watchful. Little Dog analyses emotional situations for threat in racial and domestic contexts, whereas Karim searches social settings for opportunity, danger, and recognition. Both operate with heightened sensitivity to external stimuli. Furthermore, both primary protagonists view identity as malleable rather than permanent. Little Dog's identity is shaped by ancestral trauma, memory, and emotion. Karim's individuality is exposed via performance, movement, and improvisation. In both cases, identity is a process rather than a fixed structure.

Narrative structure is the formal embedding of certain cognitive tendencies. The nonlinear memory organisation of trauma is reflected in Vuong's fragmented epistolary structure. The story's brief segments are separated by white space, which represents discontinuous perception. Kureishi's episodic narrative structure exemplifies adaptive multiplicity. Throughout Karim's tale, quick scene changes, tonal shifts, and performative transitions are employed to show cognitive flexibility. Both major characters are likewise affected by linguistic displacement. Little Dog alternates between Vietnamese and English to illustrate the erratic nature of language itself. Karim strikes a balance between suburban Englishness and racist notions of Indianness. Language becomes a site of negotiation rather than a trustworthy medium of communication.

Ultimately, both volumes demonstrate how fragmentation, diversity, and cognitive instability are adaptive responses to fundamentally unstable environments. What appears to be dysfunctional in neurotypical situations turns out to be a useful adaptation. Instead of maintaining cognitive stability, these heroes survive by reorganising cognition. Consequently, although they have distinct historical genealogies, war trauma in Vuong and urban racialization in Kureishi both exhibit similar cognitive mechanisms of survival. Their narrative structures function as both an aesthetic innovation and a formal replication of the adaptive awareness fostered by postcolonial contexts.

Conclusion

This research aims to demonstrate that narrative disruption in On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous and The Buddha of Suburbia represents adaptive neurodivergent cognition influenced by postcolonial contexts, rather than merely aesthetic experimentation. Functional survival strategies, including performative identity, plurality, fragmentation, and sensory hypersensitivity, are developed in response to racialization, violence, and instability.

The physiological imprint of trauma is reflected in Little Dog's implosive cognition, which leads to hypersensitive perception and shattered memory. Karim demonstrates adaptive performance in racially separated metropolitan environments with his explosive thinking. Despite these differences, the protagonists share cognitive traits including masking, hypervigilance, and nonlinear perception.

Importantly, the two books challenge conventional wisdom on identity stability and consistency. It is demonstrated that rather than being universal psychological principles, linear narrative and unified subjectivity are culturally particular ideas associated with imperial modernity. By rejecting preexisting systems, both works present alternative survival-shaped cognitive architectures.

This work enhances literary studies by conceptualising neurodivergence as adaptive cognition rather than as a sickness. Instead of being damaged, postcolonial consciousness is shown to be neurologically innovative. Literary form becomes an archive of the ways in which historical violence transforms perception, memory, and identity.

Ultimately, these novels demonstrate that in postcolonial modernity, survival requires cognitive flexibility rather than consistency. Their storylines demonstrate how adaptability, trauma, and displacement have shaped new ways of thinking. Instead of deviating from the norm, neurodivergence is an evolutionary response to instability.

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