

The Failure of British Multiculturalism and the Virtue of Reciprocity

Written by Afshin Shahi

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AFSHIN SHAHI, DEC 9 2010



The existing perception and enforcement of multiculturalism is hindering social integration in Britain. The slow process of social integration, which is caused by some multicultural policies, is intensifying the fragmentation of British society, thereby jeopardising the future of diversity in Britain. Multiculturalism promised to bring social inclusion, but has failed and is becoming a justification for exclusion. Instead of accommodating the positive aspects of diversity it has paved the way for *ghettoisation* of Britain, which is based on class, race, and religion.

Some may find it ironic when I, as an immigrant, complain about the failure of multiculturalism in Britain. Nevertheless, I believe the immigrants themselves should pro-actively call for an encompassing social dialogue that addresses the legacies of multiculturalism in this country. We should not wait for the far right to monopolise the debate, which often people from the mainstream avoid holding. Unfortunately, multiculturalism has turned into an over-sensitive issue, which has encouraged self-censorship. That is why the immigrants themselves should open up a debate.

I was still a teenager when I moved to Britain from Iran. From the very early stages of my social exposure to British society I came across the notion of multiculturalism, which has been working as a landmark term to symbolise a set of social attitudes and governmental policies to endorse “coexistence”. Being a young immigrant myself, I also cherished the prospects of living in a society where cultural diversity was endorsed and where legal mechanisms were set in place to protect my “otherness”. Now when I look back, I realise that, as a teenager, I was not sure how to conceptualise multiculturalism in the British context. I came from a society where social, cultural, and linguistic diversity were an inevitable part of history. Although rights of minorities were often disrespected, I could not avoid benefiting from diversity from a young age.

In stark contrast to the country I came from, I soon realised that there is a set of rights in place to protect me and the ‘likes of me’ in Britain. Although the rights were given to promote coexistence, I still felt that there was a huge lack of social cohesion in the society. I could not understand why there could still be social segregation and apparent ethnic divisions in spite of the rights given. When I started to explore some possible explanations I realised that there is a huge disparity between rights and responsibilities, which is indeed rooted in the collective understanding of

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multiculturalism.

Having said that, it would be too simplistic to blame some immigrants for failing to fulfil their responsibilities while exploiting their rights. Although there have been many shortcomings in some minority groups, there are other social ingredients beyond rights, which may stimulate the sense of responsibility for constructing and sustaining a less segregated society.

Although the rights are in place, the notion of multiculturalism has started to challenge my idealistic perspectives about the future of diversity in Britain. I am beginning to feel the notion of multiculturalism in Britain is like a mirage in a desert. For a desperately thirsty man, a mirage is a glimpse of hope for water, but the more he runs toward it, the thirstier he becomes, despite the moving image of water existing only as an illusion. Similarly, the mirage of multiculturalism promises cohesion and harmony, while in practice it has created social factionalism and exclusion.

Although multiculturalism is associated with tolerance and social pluralism, it is sometimes used as an excuse to justify social division and segregation in Britain. It is difficult to avoid the fact that under the umbrella of multiculturalism, some social groups exist in their own bubbles, completely separated from the mainstream. By confining themselves to these social bubbles they actively enforce their own exclusion. In an excluding social framework that is indifferent to the prevailing narratives of the mainstream culture, there is no ground for responsibility to grow.

The advocates for the mainstream culture talk about “British values” and how the minorities should subscribe to them. If one were to summarise these values, one is left with a few highly abstract ideas such as “fairness”, “justice”, and “freedom”. None of the excluded social groups would find these notions problematic, but since they are not socialised within the same cultural framework, they may have completely conflicting definitions for these terms. This, in turn, may very well contradict the fundamental premises of the mainstream culture.

There is nothing organic about a nation-state. In other words, Britain and Britishness are social constructs sustained by certain narratives that are passed on from one generation to another through socialisation. Naturally, the narratives are not static and they respond to the socio-political particularities of the current age. However, these ever-changing and circulating narratives still have a foundation in a certain understanding of the past. Yet history is merely constructed too. It is a selective collection of perspectives based on collective memories and collective forgetfulness.

History is important in relation to social inclusion because a certain understanding of the past might overshadow a person's understanding of the present. For example, if the negative aspects of colonialism have affected someone's past, he or she may find it difficult to connect to the prevailing understanding of history, which shapes the dominant perspective of British history. If someone regards themselves as a historic victim of Britain, he or she may not be able to be motivated themselves to feel responsible toward the society of which they are a part. Hence, his or her relationship to the society becomes one-sided and they wish only to take what is given, without any consideration of how they might reciprocate.

Voluntary reciprocation and a sense of responsibility are indispensable social ingredients for easing the process of social integration. Yet, there is an insufficient attempt to fuse such conflicting narratives in order to construct and sustain a more inclusive version of Britishness. To employ minorities in the public sector through positive discrimination, to include a few ethnic actors in British soap operas, and to celebrate foreign cuisines, does not automatically enable us to congratulate ourselves on the success of multiculturalism.

The current model of multiculturalism has minimised the platforms for social dialogues through which we can address deep social and cultural issues. If the minorities are resorting to the ghettos, where can cultural and intellectual fusion take place? Even the British education system, which is supposed to be the last bastion for disparate social narratives to harmonise, has in some cases become the very instrument to enforce division and exclusion. Year by year, the government have justified faith schools where children have to internalise their “differences”—all in the name of multiculturalism. Many of the immigrant children who do not attend faith schools still attend what I would call “race schools”. Throughout the country, there are many schools predominantly populated by certain ethnic

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compositions to which white families avoid sending their children. The British education system has failed to go beyond the obstacles of class, race, and religion and has failed in diversifying the educational institutions to promote socio-cultural fusions.

Exclusion and the *ghettoisation* of Britain is increasing the levels of mistrust and fear, a process which will only deepen the schisms in and among communities. In such situations, the culture of political correctness becomes an instrument of social control to prevent social disruption in the short term. Having a more politically correct society does not mean that people have become more tolerant. The merit of tolerance is to prevent exclusion. Hence, if the current model of multiculturalism in Britain still breeds segregation, then obviously something has gone wrong.

Naturally, no tolerant society based on liberal principles would ever attempt to standardise subcultures and impose conformity. Indeed, diversity could strengthen Britain from many perspectives. Nonetheless, this diversity only becomes valuable when there is dynamic social dialogue, when a subculture is actively engaged in a cultural exchange with the mainstream and when there is reciprocity. The current model of multiculturalism has largely failed to generate such dynamic social dialogue. Both the political system and the excluded communities have not done enough to translate the differences into cohesion and social strength. There is a limit to how far the culture of political correctness can prevent social conflicts. Thus, in order to actualise the positive potentials of diversity, new measures should be taken to address the repercussions of multiculturalism in Britain.

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