

A Comparative Reading of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam and Contemporary Multicultural Models: An Ethics Study of Inclusiveness.

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Abstract:

In an increasingly interconnected world characterised by migration, diaspora, transnational mobility, and cultural plurality, the question of how diverse communities can coexist without compromising either cultural identity or social cohesion has become increasingly significant. Multicultural discourse has generated several conceptual models for understanding cultural diversity, including the Melting Pot, Salad Bowl, Multicultural Mosaic, and Boutique Multiculturalism. Although these approaches differ in their treatment of assimilation, cultural retention, recognition, and cultural difference, they raise a common question concerning the possibility of inclusive coexistence. This paper comparatively examines these models alongside the Indian philosophical concept of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, conventionally translated as “the world is one family.” The study employs a qualitative, interpretive, and comparative methodology, drawing upon scholarship on multiculturalism, minority rights, cultural identity, and cultural difference. It argues that the Melting Pot privileges social unity at the potential cost of cultural distinctiveness, while the Salad Bowl and Multicultural Mosaic offer greater space for cultural retention but may leave unresolved the problem of meaningful interaction. Stanley Fish’s concept of Boutique Multiculturalism further demonstrates how the celebration of cultural difference can remain superficial when it does not engage with deeper political and ethical conflicts. In contrast, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam offers an ethical vocabulary centred on interconnectedness, reciprocity, and shared human belonging. The paper does not propose the ancient concept as a substitute for contemporary political theories of multiculturalism; rather, it argues that it can enrich multicultural discourse by shifting its emphasis from the management and recognition of difference towards an ethics of inclusiveness. The study consequently proposes that an inclusive multicultural order should move beyond assimilation, coexistence, and symbolic recognition towards dialogue, reciprocity, participation, and shared belonging.

Introduction:

The twenty-first century is marked by increasing cultural mobility and interaction. Migration, diaspora, international education, global communication, and transnational networks have brought individuals and communities belonging to different cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and religious traditions into sustained contact. Consequently, cultural diversity has become a defining feature of contemporary societies rather than an exceptional social condition. The central challenge is therefore not merely the presence of diversity but the manner in which diversity is understood and negotiated.

Multiculturalism emerged as an important intellectual and political response to this condition. Rather than assuming that cultural difference must necessarily disappear in the process of nation-building, multicultural thought has drawn attention to minority rights, cultural recognition, identity, and participation. Will Kymlicka's Multicultural Citizenship is particularly significant in this context because it examines the relationship between liberal democracy and minority cultural rights and questions the adequacy of a uniform conception of citizenship for culturally diverse societies (Kymlicka 10-34). His argument demonstrates that cultural membership can have significant implications for individual freedom and political equality.

Bhikhu Parekh similarly challenges the assumption that one dominant cultural framework can provide a sufficient basis for a plural society. In *Rethinking Multiculturalism*, he develops a pluralist understanding of cultural diversity and emphasises the importance of intercultural dialogue and the critical evaluation of cultures rather than either cultural absolutism or uncritical relativism (Parekh 239-68).

Yet multiculturalism cannot be reduced to one theoretical position. Its intellectual vocabulary includes several metaphors that have been employed to represent the relationship between cultural groups. The Melting Pot imagines cultural integration through blending or assimilation; the Salad Bowl represents the coexistence of distinct cultural identities; and the Multicultural Mosaic emphasises the contribution of different cultural groups to a larger social whole. Recent scholarship confirms that these metaphors continue to shape popular and academic understandings of multiculturalism, while also demonstrating that their meanings are neither fixed nor uncontested (Shakoury 1046-57).

Stanley Fish's notion of Boutique Multiculturalism adds a critical dimension to this debate. Fish identifies a form of multiculturalism that appreciates selected cultural practices—such as food, festivals, clothing, and artistic expressions—while potentially avoiding the difficult political and ethical conflicts generated by genuine cultural difference (Fish 378-95). Thus, the celebration of diversity cannot automatically be equated with inclusiveness.

It is within this theoretical context that the present paper introduces Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam into dialogue with contemporary multicultural thought. The expression, found in the Maha Upanishad, emerges from the Sanskrit formulation:

अयं निजः परो वेति गणना लघुचेतसाम् ।

उदारचरितानां तु वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम् ॥

Ayam nijah paro veti ganana laghu-cetasam;

Udāra-caritānām tu vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam.

(Mahopanishad VI.71)

The verse contrasts the narrow-minded distinction between “one's own” and “the other” with the expansive vision of the noble-minded person for whom the world constitutes one family (Maha Upanishad 6.71). The philosophical proposition is therefore not simply that different people should tolerate one another; it challenges the very construction of rigid boundaries between “self” and “other.”

The present paper does not claim that Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam constitutes a modern theory of multiculturalism. Such a claim would disregard significant historical and conceptual differences. Instead, the study approaches it as an ethical-philosophical principle capable of contributing to contemporary debates about cultural difference, belonging, and inclusiveness.

The central argument of this paper is that while contemporary multicultural models offer valuable frameworks for understanding assimilation, cultural retention, recognition, and cultural interaction, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam introduces a further ethical dimension: interconnectedness. It consequently enables a conceptual movement from merely managing cultural difference towards cultivating an inclusive consciousness in which cultural difference does not become a basis for exclusion.

Research Problem

Multicultural societies face a persistent tension between unity and difference. Complete assimilation may threaten cultural identity, while complete separation may undermine social cohesion. Similarly, the symbolic celebration of cultural diversity may create an appearance of inclusiveness without necessarily challenging structural inequality.

The research problem of this paper is therefore to examine whether inclusiveness can be conceptualised beyond the binaries of assimilation and separation.

The study specifically asks whether an ethical conception of shared human belonging can supplement existing multicultural models by encouraging not merely the recognition of difference but also dialogue, reciprocity, participation, and interconnectedness.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims:

- O₁: To examine the conceptual foundations of selected contemporary multicultural models.
- O₂: To analyse the *Melting Pot*, *Salad Bowl*, and *Multicultural Mosaic* as metaphors for cultural integration and coexistence.
- O₃: To critically examine Stanley Fish's concept of *Boutique Multiculturalism*.
- O₄: To interpret Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam as an ethical conception of universal belonging.

O₅:To comparatively examine these approaches in relation to inclusiveness.

O₆:To propose an ethically informed understanding of multicultural coexistence.

Research Questions

The paper addresses the following questions:

1. How do contemporary multicultural models conceptualise cultural difference?
2. What are the strengths and limitations of the *Melting Pot*, *Salad Bowl*, and *Multicultural Mosaic*?
3. How does *Boutique Multiculturalism* challenge superficial approaches to cultural diversity?
4. In what ways does *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* conceptualise the relationship between self and other?
5. Can *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* contribute an ethical dimension to contemporary multicultural discourse?
6. What constitutes genuine cultural inclusiveness in a plural society?

Research Methodology

The present study employs a qualitative, comparative, interpretive, and conceptual methodology. It does not rely upon quantitative data or field-based interviews. Instead, it undertakes a close reading of selected theoretical and philosophical texts concerning multiculturalism, cultural identity, minority rights, and human interconnectedness.

The principal theoretical framework is informed by Will Kymlicka's discussion of multicultural citizenship and minority rights, Bhikhu Parekh's pluralist approach to cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue, and Stanley Fish's critique of superficial multiculturalism. Contemporary scholarship on multicultural metaphors is incorporated to examine the Melting Pot, Salad Bowl, and Mosaic models (Kymlicka; Parekh; Fish; Shakoury).

The philosophical dimension is derived from the Maha Upanishad, particularly the well-known formulation *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*. The comparison is interpretive rather than genealogical: the paper does not suggest that the ancient Indian text anticipated contemporary multiculturalism. Instead, it examines whether the ethical principle contained within the verse can provide a useful conceptual lens for rethinking contemporary questions of inclusiveness.

Multiculturalism and the Question of Inclusiveness

Multiculturalism is fundamentally concerned with the relationship between cultural diversity and the political and social organisation of society. However, diversity and inclusiveness should not be treated as synonymous.

A society may contain multiple cultural groups and therefore be diverse without being inclusive. Cultural communities may remain politically marginalised, socially segregated, economically disadvantaged, or symbolically stereotyped. Inclusiveness consequently requires more than the coexistence of difference.

Kymlicka's argument is particularly relevant because he demonstrates that formal equality does not necessarily resolve the specific challenges experienced by cultural minorities. His discussion of minority rights suggests that the cultural context in which individuals exercise their rights can be significant to their substantive freedom (Kymlicka 75-107).

Parekh moves the discussion further towards cultural dialogue. His conception of a multicultural society does not simply require cultures to exist alongside one another; it requires the possibility of intercultural evaluation and dialogue (Parekh 264-68).

Thus, inclusiveness may be understood through five interconnected principles:

Recognition → Participation → Dialogue → Reciprocity → Belonging

Recognition ensures that cultural identities are not erased. Participation ensures that minority communities have meaningful access to social and political institutions. Dialogue enables communication across difference. Reciprocity prevents multiculturalism from becoming a one-sided demand imposed upon minorities. And Belonging represents the highest ethical dimension because it asks whether every individual is regarded as a legitimate member of the shared community.

The Melting Pot: Unity through Assimilation

The Melting Pot is among the most widely recognised metaphors associated with cultural integration. The metaphor imagines different cultural groups entering a common social space and blending into a new collective identity.

Historically, the metaphor became strongly associated with the United States and was popularised through Israel Zangwill's play *The Melting-Pot* (1909). Contemporary scholarship continues to associate the metaphor with assimilation and the formation of a common national identity (Shakoury 1046-49).



Figure 1. The Melting Pot

(Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melting_pot)

The principal strength of the Melting Pot lies in its emphasis on social cohesion. It recognises that a society requires certain shared civic structures and forms of collective identity. However, its limitation emerges when unity becomes dependent upon cultural conformity.

As Berray observes, food metaphors such as the Melting Pot can conceal relations of power between dominant and minority groups and may reproduce assumptions that minority communities should adapt to dominant norms (142-51).

The metaphor therefore creates a fundamental tension:

Unity may be achieved, but at what cost to cultural difference?

From the perspective of inclusiveness, the Melting Pot can be criticised for confusing integration with assimilation. When cultural identity must be dissolved in order to achieve belonging, inclusion becomes conditional upon cultural conformity.

The Salad Bowl: Coexistence without Erasure

The Salad Bowl metaphor emerged as an alternative to the assimilationist implications of the Melting Pot. In this model, different cultural “ingredients” remain distinguishable while contributing to the composition of the whole.



Figure 2. The Salad Bowl

(<https://in.pinterest.com/pin/salad-bowl-theory-decor-plate--161074124169025431/>)

The metaphor is significant because it allows cultural communities to retain their distinctive identities. Recent research describes the Salad Bowl as a model associated with cultural retention and coexistence rather than complete assimilation (Qamar).

However, coexistence does not necessarily guarantee interaction.

A salad can contain different ingredients without those ingredients having any meaningful relationship beyond occupying the same container. Similarly, culturally diverse communities may coexist geographically while remaining socially separated.

Shakoury's study of multicultural metaphors reveals that students associated the Salad Bowl with maintaining cultural identities, but some also questioned whether the metaphor adequately represents equality and interaction (1049-53).

The limitation is therefore conceptual:

Coexistence is not necessarily inclusiveness.

A genuinely inclusive society must create opportunities for interaction and reciprocity rather than merely permitting cultural communities to remain distinct.

The Multicultural Mosaic: Diversity as a Collective Whole

The Multicultural Mosaic is particularly associated with Canadian multicultural discourse. Unlike the Melting Pot, the mosaic does not require individual cultural pieces to dissolve into one homogeneous substance.

The mosaic metaphor provides a valuable conceptualisation of cultural plurality. Each cultural group constitutes a distinguishable component of the larger social structure. The metaphor therefore combines difference with collective composition.

Recent research confirms that students frequently interpret the mosaic as a metaphor for preserving distinctive identities while contributing to a larger multicultural whole (Shakoury 1049-51).

Yet the metaphor has its own limitations.



Figure 3. The Multicultural Mosaic

(<https://www.mcislanguages.com/wp-content/uploads/MCIS-Blog-Mul.-Cover.png>)

A mosaic is composed of relatively fixed pieces. Human cultures, however, are dynamic, internally diverse, and constantly transformed through migration, intermarriage, media, education, and intercultural contact.

The danger of the mosaic metaphor is therefore cultural essentialism: the assumption that every community possesses a stable and clearly identifiable cultural essence.

An ethically inclusive multiculturalism must recognise that individuals may simultaneously inhabit several cultural worlds.

Boutique Multiculturalism: When Celebration Is Not Inclusion

Stanley Fish's concept of Boutique Multiculturalism provides a necessary critique of celebratory approaches to diversity.



Figure 4. Boutique Multiculturalism

(<https://familyfirst.org.nz/2024/05/31/bruce-logan-the-rise-of-boutique-multiculturalism/>)

Fish describes Boutique Multiculturalism as a form of multiculturalism associated with ethnic restaurants, festivals, and selective appreciation of cultural difference. Its relationship to other cultures is, in his formulation, “superficial or cosmetic” (Fish 378).

The significance of this argument is that cultural appreciation can occur without meaningful political engagement.

A society may celebrate:

- cultural festivals,
- traditional food,
- clothing,
- music,
- dance,
- literature,

while simultaneously failing to address:

- discrimination,
- unequal representation,
- political marginalisation,
- structural inequality,
- prejudice,
- exclusion.

Thus:

Cultural celebration is not equivalent to cultural inclusion.

Fish's critique is especially valuable for the present study because it demonstrates why inclusiveness must be understood as a deeper ethical and political practice rather than merely as positive attitudes towards cultural difference.

Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam: An Ethics of Shared Humanity



Figure5. Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam
(<https://www.redbubble.com/i/poster/The-World-is-One-Family-Vasudhaiva-Kutumbakam-by-avimania7/164461963/flk2>)

The expression Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam is traditionally associated with the Maha Upanishad. The relevant verse states:

*Ayam nijah paro veti ganana laghu-cetasam;
Udara-caritanam tu vasudhaiva kutumbakam.*

The verse may be translated as: “This is mine, that is another’s, is the calculation of the narrow-minded; for the broad-minded, the whole world is one family” (Maha Upanishad 6.71).

The philosophical significance of the verse lies in its critique of narrow distinctions between self and other.

The categories of:

mine / yours

self / other

insider / outsider

us / them

are presented as products of restricted consciousness.

The alternative is an expanded ethical consciousness in which the world is understood as a shared familial space.

This makes Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam particularly relevant to contemporary multiculturalism. The principle does not ask cultural communities to become identical. Rather, it can be interpreted as establishing a relationship between difference and shared belonging. Its central ethical proposition can therefore be represented as:

Difference without exclusion.

This is where Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam differs conceptually from the Melting Pot. It does not require sameness as the basis of unity.

It also extends beyond the Salad Bowl and Mosaic. It does not merely ask different communities to coexist. It encourages a consciousness in which the existence of the “other” is understood within a larger framework of shared humanity.

Comparative Analysis

The five approaches may be comparatively represented as follows:

Model	Central Principle	View of Difference	Major Strength	Major Limitation
<i>Melting Pot</i>	Assimilation	Difference is blended	Social cohesion	Cultural erasure

<i>Salad Bowl</i>	Coexistence	Difference is retained	Cultural identity	Possible social separation
<i>Multicultural Mosaic</i>	Plurality	Difference is represented	Recognition	Risk of cultural essentialism
<i>Boutique Multiculturalism</i>	Appreciation	Difference is selectively celebrated	Cultural visibility	Superficiality
<i>Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam</i>	Interconnectedness	Difference exists within shared humanity	Ethical inclusiveness	Requires contemporary critical interpretation

The comparison reveals that the models do not necessarily contradict one another at every level. Instead, they address different dimensions of the multicultural question.

The *Melting Pot* asks how a society can produce unity.

The *Salad Bowl* asks how cultural identity can survive within diversity.

The *Mosaic* asks how different identities can contribute to a larger social whole.

Boutique Multiculturalism asks whether cultural appreciation genuinely constitutes multicultural engagement.

Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam raises a deeper ethical question:

Can difference itself become compatible with a shared sense of human belonging?

This question forms the conceptual centre of the present study.

From Assimilation to Inclusiveness

The comparison allows multicultural models to be understood as a movement from assimilation towards increasingly complex understandings of difference:

Melting Pot



Assimilation

Salad Bowl



Coexistence

Multicultural Mosaic



Recognition

Boutique Multiculturalism



Critical awareness of superficial celebration

Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam



Interconnectedness and shared belonging

This progression should not be interpreted as a simplistic hierarchy in which one model completely replaces another. Rather, it demonstrates how each framework exposes a different problem.

The *Melting Pot* exposes the problem of social fragmentation but risks assimilation.

The *Salad Bowl* protects difference but may permit separation.

The *Mosaic* recognises diversity but may essentialise cultures.

Boutique Multiculturalism warns against superficial appreciation.

Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam introduces an ethical vocabulary through which difference can be connected to shared humanity.

Cultural Identity and Inclusiveness

The question of cultural identity is central to multiculturalism.

An inclusive society cannot demand that individuals abandon their cultural identities in order to participate in public life. At the same time, cultural identity cannot be treated as a completely fixed and homogeneous category.

Diasporic and migrant identities demonstrate that cultural belonging is frequently plural and fluid. Individuals may identify with multiple cultural traditions simultaneously and may transform those identities through experience.

Consequently, inclusiveness should not mean preserving culture in an untouched or “authentic” form. It should mean allowing individuals and communities the freedom to negotiate cultural identity.

This is an important point of convergence between contemporary multicultural thought and the ethical possibility of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*.

If the world is conceptualised as a family, belonging does not depend upon possessing a single cultural identity.

Inclusiveness and Intercultural Dialogue

Parekh's emphasis on intercultural dialogue is particularly significant for the present argument. A multicultural society cannot simply place different cultures next to one another. It

must create opportunities through which cultural assumptions can encounter, challenge, and transform one another (264-68).

Inclusiveness therefore requires reciprocity.

If only minority communities are expected to adapt to the dominant culture, multiculturalism remains asymmetrical.

If only the majority culture determines what counts as acceptable diversity, recognition remains conditional.

An ethically inclusive model instead requires mutual transformation.

This principle can be represented as:

Recognition → Dialogue → Reciprocity → Transformation → Belonging

The process is therefore not one-directional.

The minority does not simply adapt to the majority.

The majority does not simply tolerate the minority.

Both participate in the ongoing construction of the multicultural social order.

The Ethical Contribution of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam

The distinctive contribution of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam lies in its ethical orientation.

Contemporary multiculturalism frequently asks:

- What rights should minorities possess?
- How should cultural differences be accommodated?
- How should diverse communities coexist?
- How can social cohesion be maintained?

These are necessary questions..

However, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam introduces another:

What kind of ethical consciousness should individuals cultivate towards those whom they perceive as different from themselves?

This question shifts the focus from institutional arrangements to human relationships.

It does not replace political rights, legal equality, or institutional reform. Rather, it supplements them with an ethical orientation towards interconnectedness.

The principle therefore has the potential to enrich multicultural discourse in three ways:

From Tolerance to Belonging

Tolerance may imply that difference is permitted.

Belonging implies that difference is recognised as part of the shared social fabric.

From Coexistence to Interaction

Coexistence permits groups to remain separate.

Interconnectedness encourages meaningful relationships.

From Recognition to Reciprocity

Recognition can remain one-directional.

Reciprocity requires mutual engagement and transformation.

Critical Limitations

A responsible scholarly reading must also acknowledge the limitations of the Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam framework.

First, it is historically inappropriate to treat an ancient philosophical statement as if it were formulated as a modern theory of multicultural citizenship.

Second, universal ethical language can become overly idealistic if it is detached from concrete questions of power, inequality, discrimination, and institutional exclusion.

Third, the philosophical ideal should not be used to romanticise Indian society or suggest that historical Indian social relations were uniformly inclusive.

Fourth, inclusiveness should never become another form of homogenisation. Saying that “the world is one family” must not mean that cultural differences are irrelevant.

Thus, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam should be understood as an ethical horizon rather than a complete political programme.

Its contemporary value lies in its ability to challenge narrow constructions of belonging.

Towards an Ethics of Inclusive Coexistence

The comparative discussion suggests that a more comprehensive model of multicultural inclusiveness should combine the strengths of different approaches.

From the Melting Pot, it can retain the importance of shared civic belonging.

From the Salad Bowl, it can retain cultural identity.

From the Mosaic, it can retain recognition of cultural plurality.

From the critique of Boutique Multiculturalism, it can retain awareness that celebration alone is insufficient.

From Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, it can derive an ethical principle of interconnectedness.

The resulting model may be called an Ethics of Inclusive Coexistence.

Its principles are:

1. **Cultural recognition** without hierarchy.
2. **Cultural retention** without isolation.
3. **Social integration** without forced assimilation.

4. **Dialogue** without cultural domination.
5. **Reciprocity** rather than one-sided accommodation.
6. **Participation** rather than symbolic representation.
7. **Belonging** rather than mere tolerance.
8. **Interconnectedness** without cultural homogenisation.

Such an approach reconceptualises multiculturalism not merely as the management of diversity but as the cultivation of an ethical relationship across difference.

Conclusion

The present study has examined the Melting Pot, Salad Bowl, Multicultural Mosaic, and Boutique Multiculturalism in comparison with the Indian philosophical principle of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam. The comparison demonstrates that each model provides a distinctive response to the fundamental problem of cultural difference.

The Melting Pot prioritises unity but risks assimilation. The Salad Bowl protects cultural identity but may leave communities socially separated. The Multicultural Mosaic recognises plurality but can inadvertently treat cultures as fixed and bounded entities. Boutique Multiculturalism exposes the limitations of superficial cultural celebration and reminds us that recognition without engagement may remain cosmetic.

Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam contributes a different conceptual vocabulary. Its emphasis on the world as one family challenges narrow distinctions between self and other and provides an ethical basis for thinking about shared human belonging.

The significance of this philosophical principle in contemporary multicultural discourse should not be exaggerated. It is not a substitute for legal rights, democratic institutions, minority protections, or social policies. Nevertheless, it offers an important ethical supplement to these structures.

The central argument of this paper is therefore that multicultural inclusiveness requires more than assimilation, coexistence, recognition, or celebration. It requires an ethical commitment to meaningful participation, intercultural dialogue, reciprocity, and belonging.

The movement proposed here may consequently be understood as:

Assimilation → Coexistence → Recognition → Dialogue → Reciprocity → Shared Belonging

The ultimate challenge of multiculturalism is not simply to determine how different cultures can occupy the same social space. It is to create conditions in which cultural difference does not become a justification for exclusion.

In this context, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam provides a significant ethical proposition: the “other” need not remain permanently other. The recognition of a shared humanity can become the foundation upon which cultural difference is preserved without becoming a barrier to belonging.

The future of multiculturalism, therefore, may lie not in choosing between unity and diversity, but in developing an understanding of unity through inclusive difference.

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