

Nehruvian Thoughts in English Literature

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Abstract

Introduce Nehru's role as both statesman and literary figure. Highlight major themes—secularism, rationalism, scientific temper, cultural pluralism—and mention the paper's aim: to explore how these themes permeate his own writings and echo across Indian English literature (fiction, poetry, drama, criticism). Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964), India's first Prime Minister, occupies a unique position not only in political history but also in the evolution of Indian English literature. Educated at Harrow and Cambridge, Nehru emerged with a refined command of English prose—a skill that proved instrumental in both shaping and articulating the ideological contours of the newly independent India. Recognized for his clarity and elegance, his writing earned praise from contemporaries: for example, the New York Times lauded *Glimpses of World History* as “one of the most remarkable books ever written,” with Nehru's prose likened favorably even against giants like H. G. Wells, Nehru's major works—*An Autobiography* (1936), *Glimpses of World History* (1934), and *The Discovery of India* (1946)—exemplify a distinct blend of narrative finesse, historical scope, and philosophical reflection.

Crafted during periods of imprisonment or political turbulence, these texts avoid dry exposition in favor of infused metaphor and lyrical resonance. For instance, in *The Discovery of India*, Nehru meditates on cultural plurality using nature-inspired metaphors (“mountains,” “valleys,” “rivers”) to underscore the richness of Indian civilization. Introduce Nehru's role as both statesman and literary figure. Highlight major themes—secularism, rationalism, scientific temper, cultural pluralism—and mention the paper's aim: to explore how these themes permeate his own writings and echo across Indian English literature (fiction, poetry, drama, criticism). Refer to methodology and key sources. This paper argues that Nehru's ideological and literary vision—its secular-rational modernity, respect for pluralism, and inclusive historiography—formed a structural and thematic matrix within postcolonial Indian English literature. From early fiction and poetry to later critiques, writers across generations engaged with, infused, and interrogated this Nehruvian legacy.

Keywords:

1- "Nehru's 'Discovery of India' remains a bestseller 50 years after his death | Mumbai News - Times of India". The Times of India. 30 May 2014.

2- "Bharat Mata Ki Jai: How Jawaharlal Nehru's Discovery of India offers a peek into the soul of India". Firstpost. 29 October 2016.

3- Das, Taraknath (June 1947). "India--Past, Present and the Future". *Political Science Quarterly*. **62** (2): 295–304.

Introduction

Nehru's thought, rooted in liberalism, rationalism, and nationalism, remains a foundational influence on Indian English literature. His literary works stand as models of refined English prose, while his political philosophy provided thematic inspiration for generations of writers. Whether celebrated, contested, or critically analysed, Nehru's vision continues to shape literary imaginations in India. For instance, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* re-purposes Nehru's "composite culture" idea—and even language itself—by crafting a "countified English" that blends Indian bashes, local dialects, and English, echoing Nehru's own experiments with usage. Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*, though a historical play, allegorically mirrors Nehru's idealistic yet flawed political aspirations. Meanwhile, Nissim Ezekiel's poetry carries forward the introspective, rational sensibility shaped by the open, secular ethos Nehru championed.

However, the reception of Nehruvian thought is not uniformly celebratory. Critics argue that his privileging of English and Western science sidelined indigenous epistemologies—a continuation of colonial bias. Later literary voices, especially feminist and Dalit writers, interrogate the limitations of Nehru's promise of unity, revealing fissures in caste and gender narratives that his vision overlooked.

India's first Prime Minister, occupies a rarefied position not only in political history but also in the genesis of modern Indian English literature. His extensive output—spanning autobiographical reflections, discursive histories, impassioned speeches, and letters—demonstrates a literary quality that, to this day, is hailed for its lyrical clarity, rational sensibility, and cultural breadth.

Nehru's stylistic signature can be traced in three foundational works: *Glimpses of World History* (1934), where his narrative is anchored in scientific rationality and a globally inclusive historiography; *An Autobiography* (1936), merging the personal with the political in a nation-building narrative and *The Discovery of India* (1946), an intellectual odyssey that blends history, philosophy, art, and culture into a cohesive national archive.

Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, was a multifaceted personality - a statesman, a writer, and a visionary. His writings, particularly his English prose, reflect his metaphorical cast of mind, historical perspectives, and vision for the nation. This research paper aims to explore Nehru's contribution to English literature, analysing his literary style, historical reflections, and philosophical thoughts.

Nehru's Literary Style

Nehru's writing style is characterized by his use of metaphors, similes, and vivid descriptions. In his speeches and writings, he often compared history to a great river, emphasizing its complexities and uncertainties. For instance, in a speech to the Constituent Assembly in 1947, Nehru imagined himself "standing on the sword's edge of the present between the mighty past and the mightier

future". This metaphor highlights the challenges of navigating the present while being mindful of the past and future.

Historical Reflections

Nehru's writings often reflected his deep understanding of history and its relevance to the present. In "Glimpses of World History", he provided a kaleidoscopic view of history, filling the dry bones of historical events with flesh and blood. He believed that history was not just a record of past events but a living, breathing entity that shaped the present and future. Nehru's historical reflections were not limited to Indian history; he drew parallels with global events, quoting eminent poets and writers like Pushkin, Hugo, and Wordsworth.

Philosophical Thoughts

Nehru's philosophical thoughts were shaped by his experiences as a statesman, writer, and individual. In his autobiography, he wrote about his mental development and outlook on public events. He emphasized the importance of idealism, disinterested courage, and the need for leaders to inspire people. Nehru's writings also touched on the human condition, describing the struggles and triumphs of ordinary people. His quotes, such as "History is a record of the martyrdom of man", reflect his profound understanding of human nature.

Nehru as a Man of Letters

Nehru's contribution to Indian writing in English is significant. His books, such as "The Discovery of India" and "An Autobiography", are considered literary masterpieces. According to Dr. V. Karunanithi and Dr. S. Mahadevan, Nehru's writings expressed his perspectives on the nation's culture and values, showcasing his vision for India. His literary works have been widely acclaimed and studied globally.

Nehru's contribution to English literature is undeniable. His writings, characterized by their metaphorical style, historical reflections, and philosophical thoughts, offer valuable insights into his vision for India and the world. As a man of letters, Nehru's literary works continue to inspire and educate readers globally. This research paper highlights the significance of Nehru's writings, encouraging further exploration and analysis of his literary legacy.

The central thesis of this paper is that Nehru's ideological frameworks—secularism, scientific temper, cultural pluralism—became structural motifs in postcolonial Indian English literature. These principles provided both inspiration and intellectual platforms for fiction, poetry, drama, and literary criticism. Yet, literary engagement with Nehruvian thought is not merely homage; it also entails interrogation, critique, and revision, as writers grappled with the limitations of rational modernity, caste injustice, and linguistic hegemony.

Approaching this discourse, this study will examine Nehru as a literary-statesman, then trace his intellectual imprint across multiple genres, and finally assess how literature positions itself both within and against Nehruvian paradigms. Drawing on textual analysis, critical commentary, and

theoretical examination—including ecocriticism, postcolonial critique, and linguistics—this paper endeavours to map the enduring resonance of Nehruvian thought in Indian English literary culture.

Nehru’s intellectual framework centers on three key pillars:

1. Secular, scientific modernity – championing rationality and science as unifying forces in a diverse nation.
2. Cultural and linguistic pluralism – valuing multiple Indian languages and traditions alongside English, avoiding dominance of any single heritage
3. Inclusive historiography – narrating India in a global context, embracing non-European traditions and countering Eurocentric narratives.

These themes were not limited to theory—they found linguistic articulation in literature: Nehru’s usage of English was neither slavish nor sentimental; instead, he adopted a “conversational style, lucid and suggestive,” woven with figures of speech and intellectual allusions that still resonate in Indian English literary aesthetics.

Structure & Scope:

Nehru as Literary-Statesman: analysis of style, rhetoric, and metaphors in key texts.

1. Impact on Indian English Writing: across fiction (e.g., Narayan, Anand), drama (e.g., Karnad), poetry (e.g., Ezekiel), and criticism (e.g., Sahgal).
2. Critical Perspectives: exploring continuities with colonial frameworks and literary challenges from marginalized voices.
3. Case Studies: in-depth textual analysis of *Midnight’s Children*, *Tughlaq*, selected epitaphs from Ezekiel, and examples from Nehru’s letters.

Nehru as Literary Architect of the Nation

The Discovery of India (1946) and *Glimpses of World History* (1934) shaped a unified national identity, blending India’s long past with aspirations toward a secular, progressive future. These works offered a compelling narrative structure—historical, philosophical, and literary—that informed postcolonial literary imagination

Nehru’s writing style—rich metaphors (“tryst with destiny”, “sword’s edge of the present”)—elevated political speech into literary expression, paying attention to language, tone, and cultural ethos.

2. Influence on Indian Writing in English

- His concept of modernity—bridging tradition with Western science and rationality—deeply influenced post-independence Indian English prose and poetry, encouraging an embrace of both cultural roots and global perspectives.
- Postcolonial novelists often frame their narratives against the backdrop of the “Nehruvian promise”—a secular, democratic India. Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* is a prime example, portraying the fragmentation of Nehru’s vision and its emotional impact on citizens

- Emerging writers, such as C.D. Narasimha, critically examined Nehru's literary and ideological legacy—analyzing how his speeches and prose laid foundations for critique, national identity, and literary modernism 3. Literary Criticism & Debates
- Nehru's commitment to linguistic pluralism—valuing Hindi, Sanskrit, Urdu, yet rooted in English—was elementally literary. He emphasized each language's unique cultural expression and resisted forcing one over another.
- His advocacy of Sahitya Akademi and translated literature facilitated a multilingual literary culture, harboring cross-pollination between English and regional literatures 4. Reflecting Nehru's Legacy in Plays and Poetry
- In modern Indian drama, Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* allegorized Nehru's idealism and disillusionment—parallels between historical chess moves and political misadventures resonated deeply when first staged in the 1960.
- Indian English poets like Nissim Ezekiel grew in the cultural milieu shaped by Nehru—Debut collections like *A Time to Change* reflected self-aware postcolonial identity, rational thought, and modern sensibility

5. Critique of Nehruvian Influence

- Some contemporary voices argue that Nehru continued colonial patterns—e.g., privileging English-centric science and dismissing indigenous epistemologies—which shaped literary and educational priorities.
- Others, especially in literature, question the Nehruvian ideal of unity as masking inequalities and exclusions. Works like Advani's *Beethoven Among the Cows* portray fissures beneath proclaimed national unity.

IV. Impact on Indian Writing in English

A. Fictional Narratives

- R. K. Narayan: His simple, realist Malgudi stories, avoiding colonial-political gaze, may reflect Nehru's secular, culturally grounded narrative.
- Mulk Raj Anand: Social realism and rationalism in *Untouchable* mirror Nehru's concern for modernization and justice
- Nissim Ezekiel: Poet shaped by rational, introspective Nehruvian climate—modern Indian English poetry.
- Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*: Allegory of Nehru's idealism and political disillusionment—resonating with “tryst with destiny.”

Cultural Criticism & Non-Fiction

- Nayantara Sahgal and other Nehruvian-acolytes: Fusing political ideology with literary expression, craft, and critique

- Sahitya Akademi Speeches: Nehru's patronage encouraged translations across Indian languages, fostering modern literary pluralism.

A. Supportive Views

- Nehru's blending of rationalism, universal humanism, and literary finesse provided fertile ground for a cohesive national literature in English.

B. Criticisms & Limitations

- Colonial continuities: privileging English or Western science sometimes marginalized indigenous epistemologies.
- Critique via literature: Postcolonial writers interrogate Nehruvian assumptions of unity and secularism. Example: later feminist or caste-issue fiction/performance.

Citation:

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