



# Remembering Nehru and Non-Alignment in some Postcolonial Indian and French Texts

Geetha Ganapathy-Doré

## ► To cite this version:

Geetha Ganapathy-Doré. Remembering Nehru and Non-Alignment in some Postcolonial Indian and French Texts. International Journal of South Asian Studies, 2017, 10 (1), pp.5-11. hal-02119321

**HAL Id: hal-02119321**

**<https://hal.science/hal-02119321>**

Submitted on 3 May 2019

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Public Domain

**Remembering Nehru and Non-Alignment in some Postcolonial Indian and French Texts**

Geetha Ganapathy-Doré

Université Paris 13, Sorbonne Paris Cité

Published in

*International Journal of South Asian Studies*, Pondicherry University

Vol 10, No1, January-June 2007, pp: 5-11.

[http://www.pondiuni.edu.in/sites/default/files/Journal\\_final\\_mode.pdf](http://www.pondiuni.edu.in/sites/default/files/Journal_final_mode.pdf)

### Abstract

For readers of Indian history, Nehru was the champion of anticolonialism, the architect of modern India, the ideologue of a mixed economy at the service of social justice, the Pandit from Kashmir, the purveyor of Panch Sheel, the disillusioned Prime Minister who had unwittingly initiated a dynastic democracy by relying on his daughter Indira after the death of his wife Kamala. It is customary for scholars to discuss Nehru by contrasting his ideas with those of Gandhi or his rivals Subhash Chandra Bose and Mohammed Ali Jinnah. Nehru's relationship with Ambedkar was rather ambiguous. This purpose of this article is to try and see how Nehru is remembered in Indian English fiction (Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, 1981; Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*, 1989 and his *Nehru: The Invention of India*, 2003), French fiction (Catherine Clément's *Pour l'amour de l'Inde*, 1993) and Yin Marsh's autobiography *Doing Time with Nehru: The Story of an Indian Chinese Family* (2016). Relying on Nehru's own writings, Ramachandra Guha's *Makers of Modern India* and Nayantara Sahgal's *Nehru's India* as counter texts, it looks at how in the memorialization of Nehru, his oft-quoted "Tryst with destiny" speech becomes a matrix for fictional creation, how his idea of India as palimpsest shapes the story of the nation and how the national bio-icon is sometimes downsized to a novelistic persona. By examining the plural narratives about Nehru, the article retraces the evolution of India as a nation-state in the face of the ideological shifts of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

*Key words:* Nehru, memory, history, India, China

Human memory incorporates four interrelated processes: memorization, preservation, reproduction and forgetting. Indeed the right to be forgotten by Google is in effect in the European Union since 2014 as part of the human right to privacy. The construction of national memory may involve individual icons (Ghosh, 2011) and the collective. It may focus on a person, a place or an event. It may be private or public, positive or negative. While national memory is necessary to make meaning of one's identity as a citizen, it may be instrumentalized for ideological and political ends. Memorialization, on the other hand, is "the public *mise en récit* of the past invoked in the present for the sake of the future," to quote Denis Peschanski (Peschanski, 2013). Memorialization can be immediate as in the case of 9/11 attacks or delayed as in the case of slavery. Memorialization can take various forms – literary, visual, aural and digital. The violent demolition of monuments and statues has also been performed in an attempt to erase memory, produce collective amnesia and rewrite history.

Every culture has its own ritual of remembering and methods of transmitting its legacy to future generations. In the West, the duty to remember has been conceptualized as an obligation for the citizen as well as the state to own responsibility for collective evils such as the holocaust or slavery. The expression "duty to remember" which was forged in the 1970s in France came to the foreground of public debate in the 1990s, while re-examining the role of France in the holocaust in the wake of the fall of the Berlin wall. It was then extended to include the untold parts of colonial memory. Questions such as the retelling of the story of the nation, the role of witnesses and historians, heritagization of the past and recognition of the victims are the aspects that are subsumed in this concept (Ledoux, 2016). By contrast, the Balinese culture attaches great importance to ancestor worship which is a manifestation of the duty to remember the imprint of the powerful dead (Chambert-Loir & Reid, 2002). We know this practice to be a living trace of vedic rituals. Transposing the family model at the level of

nation states, we often employ the term "founding fathers." Remembering great political leaders is a way of reinforcing the emotional bond that unites the citizens of a nation into a well-knit community.

The nation-state has come under attack after the fall of the Russian empire and the rise of either supranational blocs or non-state actors. Yet, national boundaries have never mattered more than today when the combined forces of migration, terrorism and climate change are transforming world politics. India as a sovereign nation-state celebrated its 72<sup>nd</sup> independence day on 15<sup>th</sup> August 2018. In this context, this article tries to examine why Nehru and his cherished idea of non-alignment have been relegated to the margins of history or erased and explore who, on the contrary, remembers Nehru, how and why, relying basically on Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), Shashi Tharoor's *Great Indian Novel* (1989) as well as his biography of Nehru (2003), Cathérine Clément's *Pour l'amour de l'Inde* (1993), and Yin Marsh's memoir *Doing Time with Nehru* (2015). This textual approach contradicts Shiv Visvanathan's remark that "there is little of Nehru in memory and ... little of it in text" (Visvanathan, 2015, p. 103). An academic survey of the memorialization of Nehru in literary and scholarly texts, either in a laudatory or in a polemical mode, offers inroads into how the story of Nehru inspires story-tellers and how such story telling serves to write different versions of the story of India.

For readers of Indian history, Nehru was the champion of anticolonialism, the architect of modern India, the ideologue of a mixed economy at the service of social justice, the Pandit from Kashmir, the purveyor of Panch Sheel, the disillusioned Prime Minister who had unwittingly initiated a dynastic democracy by relying on his daughter Indira after the death of his wife Kamala. If, in popular imagery, Gandhi was the saint and the father of the nation, Nehru was depicted as the Chacha, the affable uncle who was fond of children. This is perhaps one of the reasons why there are more statues of Gandhi in India than those of Nehru.

It is true that Gandhi used his body as a tool of communication with the public (Ramaswamy, 2018), while Nehru remained more a writer of texts at heart, as his numerous letters to chief ministers of states suggest.

Nehru has been ranked by literary historians as one of India's eminent prose writers. The three books he wrote *Glimpses of World History* (1934), *Towards Freedom* (1936) and *The Discovery of India* (1946), are, of course, incontrovertible for anyone who wants to understand the history of India. The letters he wrote to his daughter not only capture his intellectual versatility but also testify to his paternal care which he tried to substitute for his prolonged absence. Both Nehru and Rushdie are Cambridge alumni. Nehru studied chemistry, geology and botany while Rushdie specialized in history. Both of them in their own ways have contributed to the narrative construction of India.

The very title of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* bears the imprint of Nehru's oft-quoted "Tryst with destiny speech" in parliament. Indeed the protagonist Saleem Sinai, very much like the author of the novel, is "fathered by history" (Rushdie, 1981, p.118) and his birth on the stroke of midnight on August 15<sup>th</sup> 1947 is punctuated by Nehru's speech and paralleled by the birth of the nation. In a letter to Baby Saleem, Nehru writes, "we shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own" (p. 122). *Midnight's Children* offers, therefore, a critical assessment of India's democracy under Nehru and the dynastic turn it took after his death.

Rushdie portrays Nehru as "wiry, serious man" (pp. 115-116). While he draws from the idealism of *The Discovery of India* to describe the idea of India as a "new myth, a dream, a mass fantasy, a collective fiction, a fable" (p. 112), Rushdie uses Saleem as a ventriloquist to parody Nehruvian discourse. The telepathy of the *Midnight Children's Conference*, which is a fictional foil to the Indian National Congress, is but a literary trope for the many journeys across India that Jawaharlal Nehru undertook to take stock of the pulse of India. Saleem

Sinai's identification with the Prime Minister is so full at one point that he proclaims "I became Jawaharlal Nehru. Prime Minister and Author of Framed Letters" (p. 241).

The "grotesque aberrational monsters of independence" (p. 434) both "embody and undermine Nehru's India" as Nicole Weickgenannt Thiara puts it (2009, p. 33). As a modernist, Nehru scorned astrology and superstitions. The novel's suspense is built up by astrological predictions and futuristic time travels as if to show that Nehru had erred on the side of optimism. The Nehruvian faith in secularism is shown to be challenged by communal strife (p. 277) and his belief in socialism contested by communism (p.185). Partition is perpetuated in Indo-Pak wars in Kashmir, the Rann of Kutch and Bangladesh. State re-organisation on the basis of linguistic claims gets underway as a centrifugal force against the state (p. 189). However, much like the Prime Minister who believes in non-alignment, the intradiegetic narrator Saleem advocates the third principle against the endless duality of masses and classes, capital and labour, individual and humanity, enlightenment and bigotry (p. 255). His Hindu rival Shiva simply rubbishes it. Saleem himself concludes that "if there is a third principle, its name is childhood. But it dies, or rather it is murdered" (p. 256). If at all there is any means for national integration in Rushdie's novel, it happens through gastronomy, chutnification (p. 460).

Nehru's death after the Chinese aggression is reported matter-of-factly in the novel (p. 327). The final chapters of *Midnight's Children* depict the excesses of emergency rule during which Nehru's daughter Indira is identified with India and vice versa (p. 420). Instead of being empowered by freedom and democracy, Saleem Sinai becomes impotent after going through the compulsory vasectomy performed to control India's growing population during the Emergency. Rushdie warns the reader about his pessimistic take on the failed promises of India by specifying what is memory's truth. "It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates,

minimizes, glorifies and vilifies also. But in the end, it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but unusually coherent version of events" (p. 211).

Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* published in 1995, i.e., after the Ayodhya incident is an elegy to Nehru's India. Nehru's idea of India as an "ancient palimpsest" (1945/1985, p.59) appears as a filigree in the novel in the form of an India imagined as promised and dream country, Palimpsestine (p.226). Remembering Nehru's reservations about embodying India as Bharat Mata (1945/1985, p.60), Rushdie etches the character of Aurora Zagoiby as mother of mixed blood. In this novel, the name of India's first Prime Minister becomes that of a pet dog, which, after its death, gets stuffed and led around on wheels like a toy. The political satire cannot be more obvious.

Unlike Rushdie's endorsement of Nehru's idea of India, but criticism of his attempt at nation building as a bumpy ride, Shashi Tharoor's fictional account of him in *The Great Indian Novel* in which he gives epic dimensions to the freedom struggle is rather eulogistic. Shashi Tharoor gives him the mask of the mythical but blind king of the Kauravas, Dhritarashtra, known "for his confident rhetorical flourishes and dazzling visual metaphors" (Tharoor, 1989/1990, p.304) in his postmodern and parodic narrative. Nehru's rival in the accession to power is Pandu alias Subhash Chandra Bose and his arch enemy Mohammed Ali Karna, the leader of Karnistan. In a strategy typical of *The Mahabharata*, the viceroy uses his beautiful wife as a secret weapon in the negotiation for decolonization. However Nehru's romance with the vicereine Georgina Drewpad helps him perform of the reverse conquest of Great Britain by India. Out of their illegitimate relationship is born the frail Draupati Mokrasia (p.261) or the hybrid Indian democracy. While she is growing up, the Chakars invade India and "expose the shallowness of her international pretensions to the world. They even shook the credibility of Dhritarashtra's non-alignment" (p. 304). This military defeat shatters Dhritarashtra's self-esteem and breaks his heart as a result of which he dies, "immobile in the



yogic posture" (p. 305). After his death his daughter Priya Duryodini is sworn as PM by the party members who see in her only a woman they could manipulate as a figurehead. The novel's focus shifts from independence to democracy, but the author's literary affinities definitely lie with Nehru. He too quotes from Nehru's tryst with destiny speech which once again serves as a productive matrix of fiction. "At the hour of darkness when the world slumbers, India awakens to the dawn of freedom" (p. 230).

Leaving aside the allegorisation of national figures and the genre of historiographic metafiction, Tharoor resorts to classical biography in *Nehru the Invention of India* published to evoke "the extraordinary life and career" (Tharoor, 2017, p. 235) of Jawaharlal Nehru and reconstitute his great stature and the multiple facets of his personality in true measure with a view to canonizing him as the icon of Indian democracy. The story of his birth is steeped in myth. In order to bless the accursed Motilal with a son, a yogi sacrifices the life time of his penance. Tharoor takes time to explain the meaning of Nehru's first (precious jewel) and family names (Nehar in Urdu means canal, Naru is a village in Kashmir) as if to counter the apocryphal stories spread on the darknet by some Hindu fundamentalists. As a little boy, he pictures Nehru as traumatized by the violent behavior of his father who punishes him for pocketing a pen and teaches him a lesson in honesty. Nehru's privileged background is then emphasized which gets him to Harrow. Thanks to the sports activities he practices there, Nehru is trained in physical endurance. Tharoor describes Nehru's graduation from Cambridge and his pursuit of legal education in the Inner Temple as unremarkable. Incidentally, he dismisses Nehru's alleged homosexuality as unwarranted. As a son, Nehru is portrayed as a rebel. When he returns to India, he gets involved, on the behest of his father, in the Indian National Congress where he entertains a filial relationship with Gandhi. He criticizes Gandhi for his cautious manner of fighting with the British even as objects to his own father's overprotective attitude. Nehru's sense of compromise is manifest in his agreeing

to an arranged marriage with Kamala Kaur. Though he is a loving brother to his two sisters, he does not have much time for his daughter Indira as he spends ten years in prison which he happily devotes to writing books. As a nationalist leader, Nehru is presented as charismatic, popular and indefatigable. Indeed one of his onlookers puts a crown on his head, equating him to Krishna. As head of the Congress party, he faces tough resistance from Subbash Chandra Bose, Vallab Bhai Patel and Mohammed Ali Jinnah. Gandhi's grooming of Nehru as the future PM alienates Mohamed Ali Jinnah who will claim a separate nation for the Muslims. As India's voice abroad, the caliber of Nehru's intellect is shown to command respect. While Nehru's pan-Asian vision is highlighted, Nehru's complex relationship with his law minister Ambedkar regarding the Hindu Code Bill is not dwelt upon as in Ramachandra Guha's *India after Gandhi*. Nehru's much publicized love affair with Edwina is recorded as a sentimental and not a sexual one, though Tharoor does not deny that Nehru had had female companions after Kamala's death.

Prime Minister Nehru is unconsciously likened to Emperor Ashoka, as his contribution to the four pillars of India (democratic institution building, secularism and socialism at home and non-alignment abroad) is highlighted. Indeed Tharoor depicts Nehru as the elective monarch of India, an idea that he twists from Vajpayee's calling Nehru the prince in his valedictory speech. Though there exist other biographies of Nehru, Tharoor's biography stands out as "a fascinating tale of the 20<sup>th</sup> century told from the vantage point of the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (Tharoor, 2017, p. 229). Shashi Tharoor's literary act of remembering Nehru carves a place for himself as a brilliant heir to Nehru in Indian English prose writing. It is at the same time a political gesture. By hero-worshipping Nehru as a "politician above politics," Tharoor consecrates him as the father of Indian democracy and strengthens the democratic credentials of the Congress party of which he is a veteran.

The story of India's decolonization has always fascinated the French public. As imperial rivals, France had lost out to Britain in territorial domination in India. The British exit from India was an indirect vindication of French revolutionary ideals. Catherine Clément's 1993 novel about the Nehru Edwina affair comes after Helene Cixous's play *L'Indiade ou l'Inde de leur rêves* (1987). Their literary predecessor is Dominique Lapierre's and Larry Collins' historical narrative *Cette nuit la liberté* (1975). The focus here is on Edwina and Lord Louis Mountbatten, their open marriage in which each was free to choose their lovers. As Catherine Clément herself was in India as the French ambassador's wife, she uses Edwina as her imaginary ego, her own discovery of India and her relations with Indians. The fifteen page supplement on the author to the 532 pages novel confirms this narcissistic thread. Though the narrative is well documented, Clément's attempt to downsize Nehru as a desiring subject by having recourse to tried and tested romantic clichés (Nehru calling Edwina Dee, walking in the rose gardens like a Mogul emperor in miniature paintings), makes her transmute the history of India into a simple love story. In her end-of-the-Raj romance, the tryst may be said prevail over the destiny.

On the other hand, Yin Marsh's autobiographical and trauma narrative *Doing Time with Nehru, The Story of an Indian-Chinese family* is an eye-opener in the sense it illustrates the internment of Indian citizens of Chinese descent in Rajasthan that Rushdie mentions in passing in *Midnight's Children* (p.299). Yin Marsh's father comes to India in 1944 fleeing the Communist revolution. The family first settles in Calcutta before moving on to Darjeeling where they operate a restaurant. Yin Marsh is a student at Loreto convent when the school has to close abruptly in 1962 during the Chinese war. First, their father is suspected to be a spy and imprisoned for fifteen months under the Foreigner's Act 1962. When her mother's attempt to exfiltrate the children to Kathmandu fails, Yin and her brother Bobby are interned in the Deoli camp in the Rajasthan for two and a half months. Ironically it was the same camp

where Nehru was imprisoned during the British Raj. Yin Marsh explains the atmosphere of suspicion and fear they were subjected to and the typical mechanisms of denunciation, discrimination, dispossession and deprivation of liberty used by the Indian government. Yin and her brother owe their freedom to an international correspondent who had earlier condemned Nehru's indifference towards Tibet and who writes to him saying that he would expose the matter in the press. When the war ends and the Chinese return from their internment, they are not able to claim their property back. Some of them had to return to China. Yin Marsh's family had to migrate to the US. In 1998, her own daughter wrote a thesis on Chinese internment in India. In 2001, Yin Marsh did get back to India for a family reunion and that event triggered the writing of this memoir. Family photographs and the visuals provided by her brother structure this vivid narrative. Yin Marsh's ultimate aim is to give voice an episode that had been silenced from history and convince the Indian government to issue an apology. One could, of course argue, that the Indian internment of the Chinese could not be compared to the internment of the Japanese in America during the Second World War about which many novels have been written, notable among them being Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston's 1973 memoir *Farewell to Manzanar*. Whatever the scale of the impact of internment, it is clear that one cannot relativize the arbitrary behavior of the state under Nehru's stewardship because he abhorred Nazism and Fascism in any form.

In the commemorative volume published on the occasion of the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Nehru's birth in 2015, his niece Nayantara Sahgal tells us how Nehru wanted to be remembered: "A man who, with all his mind and heart, loved India and the Indian people." (Sahgal, 2015, p.17) If the Emergency period contributed to what Shiv Visvanathan calls the "banalization" of Nehru (2015, p.102), the 1990s saw the demonization of Nehru after the economic liberalization of India by Manmohan Singh and the consequent overthrow of nehruvism. In a multipolar world, non-alignment seems obsolete as concept. In an "unaligned

world" as Mani Shankar Iyer puts it (2015, p. 42), it means independence in foreign policy. The Indian envoy to Indonesia for the sixtieth anniversary of the Bandung conference omitted Nehru's name. The resurgence of a Hindu past that is being glorified in contemporary India can only be countered by an inventiveness that is characteristic of Nehru, "the orchestrator of the impossible and the inconceivable" to quote Vajpayee (Tharoor, 2017, p.236). "To be forgotten is to die twice" according to Paul Ricoeur (2000, p. 323). The word Nehruviana invented by Kai Friesen and used by Kiran Nagarkar indicates that there is indeed a life after death for Nehru because Nehruvian legacy is what helps India remain the "land of the better story" (Tharoor, 2017, p.234). One could only be thankful to the angel of history to have taken Nehru under its wings, when one reads Arundhati Raoy's *Ministry of Utmost Happiness* which portrays the inevitable distortion of Nehru's dream of a politically democratic, socially progressive, reasonably secular and economically inclusive India.

## References

- Ayer, Mani Shankar. (2015). Interpreting Nehru in the 21st Century. In Nayantara Sahgal (Ed.) *Nehru's India. Essays on the Maker of a Nation* (21-42). New Delhi: Speaking Tiger Publishing.
- Chambert-Loir, Henri & Anthony Reid. (2002). *The Potent Dead*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Cixous, Hélène. (1987). *L'Indiade ou l'Inde de leur rêves*. Paris: Théâtre du Soeil.
- Collins, Larry & Dominique Lapierre. (1975) *Freedom at Midnight*. London: Simon & Shuster.
- Clément, Catherine. (1993). *Pour l'amour de l'Inde*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Friese, Kai. (2007). Slow Speed: Elegies of Underdevelopment.  
<https://bidoun.org/articles/slow-speed>
- Ghosh, Bishnupriya. (2011). *Global Icons: Apertures to the Popular*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Guha, Ramachandra. (2013). *Makers of Modern India*. New Delhi: Penguin/Viking Books.
- Houston, Jeanne Wakatsuki. (2002). *Farewell to Manzanar*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Books for young readers.
- Ledoux, Sébastien. (2016). *Le Devoir de mémoire. Une formule et son histoire*. Paris: CNRS.
- Marsh, Yin. (2015). *Doing Time with Nehru. The Story of an Indian Chinese Family*. New Delhi: Zubaan.
- Nagarkar, Kiran. My Quodien Companion (The Common Man's Nehru). In Nayantara Sahgal (Ed.) *Nehru's India. Essays on the Maker of a Nation* (163-186). New Delhi: Speaking Tiger Publishing.
- Nehru, Jawaharlal. (2004) *Letters from a father to his daughter*. New Delhi: Viling (Original work published in 1929).
- Nehru, Jawaharlal. (1934). *Gimpes of World History: Being further letters to his daughter, written in prison, and containing a rambling account of history for young people*. London: Lindsay Drummond Limited.
- Nehru, Jawaharlal. (1936) *Towards Freedom*. London: The Bodley Head.
- Nehru, Jawaharlal. (1985) *The Discovery of India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press. (Original work published in 1945).
- Nehru, Jawaharlal & Madhav Khosla. (2014). *Letters for a Nation: From Jawaharlal Nehru to His Chief Ministers, 1947-1963 by Jawaharlal Nehru*. London: Allen Lane.

- Peschanski, Denis. (2013) *Mémoire et Mémorialisation: volume 1: de l'absence à la représentation*. Paris: Hermann.
- Peschanski, Denis & Brigitte Sion. (2018). *La Vérité du témoin: Mémoire et mémorialisation vol. 2*. Paris: Hermann.
- Ramaswamy, Sumathi. (2018). Gandhi in the Gallery: The Art of Disobedience. Keynote lecture delivered on July 2018 at the 25<sup>th</sup> European Conference on South Asian Studies held in Paris.
- Ricoeur, Paul. (2004). *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Arundhati Roy. (2017). *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Gurgaon: Penguin Random House.
- Rushdie, Salman. (1982). *Midnight's Children*. London: Picador. (Original work published in 1981).
- Rushdie, Salman. (1995). *The Moor's Last Sigh*. London: Random House.
- Sahgal, Nayantara. (2015). *Nehru's India. Essays on the Maker of a Nation*. New Delhi: Speaking Tiger Publishing.
- Tharoor, Shashi. (1990). *The Great Indian Novel*. London: Penguin Books (Original work published in 1989).
- Tharoor, Shashi. (2003). *Nehru the Invention of India*. New Delhi: Aracade Publishing.
- Tharoor, Shashi. (2017). Nehru's relevance in India today. *The Massachusetts Review*, 58(2), 228-236.
- Thiara, Nicole Weickgenannt. (2009). *Salman Rushdie and Indian Historiography: Writing the Nation into Being*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Visvanathan, Shiv. (2015). A Tryst with Nehru. In Nayantara Sahgal (Ed.) *Nehru's India. Essays on the Maker of a Nation* (89-104). New Delhi: Speaking Tiger Publishing.