

SAMQUEST-Journal of Emerging Innovations

E-ISSN 3108-1207

Vol.2, Issue 1, pp.198-208, Jan- June 2026

Available online at : <https://www.samglobaluniversity.ac.in/archives/>

Research Review

"Comparative Study of Eugenics in English and Hindi Literature"

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Received:29/05/2026; **Accepted:** 17/06/2026; **Published:**22/07/2026

Abstract

This paper presents a comparative study of how the concept of eugenics is represented in English and Hindi literature. Eugenics, the idea of improving the human race by controlling reproduction and promoting “desirable” traits, became influential in the West in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. English and Hindi literature, shaped by different histories and cultures, reflect and respond to these ideas in unique ways.

In English literature, writers like George Bernard Shaw and T.S. Eliot engaged with eugenic thought—sometimes directly, sometimes critically. For example, Shaw’s *Man and Superman* presents the idea of the “superman” or evolved human, created through conscious breeding and intellectual progress. The play includes philosophical debates about the future of humanity, gender roles, and the potential to produce superior individuals. T.S.

Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, though not explicitly about eugenics, reflects deep anxieties about decay, degeneration, and the future of civilization—anxiety that fuelled eugenic thinking in other spheres.

In contrast, In Indian literature, examples of eugenics appear primarily through the concepts of desirable and undesirable progeny in religious and medical texts, as well as in the historical justification of the caste system. These examples do not align with modern understandings of genetics and predate the term "eugenics," but they promoted the idea of selectively encouraging or discouraging reproduction for "better" births. The psychological and social impact of caste oppression, including its eugenic undertones, is a central theme in many Indian novels, such as Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935). Through narratives that question meritocratic and hierarchical systems,

another writer, Chetan Bhagat often critiques the tendency to assign human value according to inherited or socially privileged traits, thereby offering an implicit challenge to eugenic modes of thinking. Writer like Premchand tackled issues of caste, poverty, social injustice, and moral upliftment. In *Godaan*, he presents a deeply human portrayal of rural life, where dignity and character matter more than birth or lineage.

While English literature often reflects a fascination with the scientific and philosophical implications of eugenics, Hindi literature tends to focus on social realities and collective progress. Both traditions, however, grapple with the question: What makes a society or a person “better”? English texts often explore individual evolution or decline, while Hindi texts stress moral reform, social justice, and the need to uplift the marginalized.

In conclusion, this paper argues that English and Hindi literature provide contrasting perspectives on eugenics. English literature, influenced by scientific and philosophical developments of the West, often engages with the theme intellectually or metaphorically. Hindi literature, grounded in social reform movements and humanist ideals. Together, these literatures offer important insights

into how societies imagine the future of humanity—and how literature can both reflect and resist dangerous ideas.

Keywords:

Chetan Bhagat, T.S. Eliot, Eugenics, Heredity

Introduction

Eugenics is the idea that human beings can improve their hereditary qualities by controlling birth, marriage, and reproduction. The word “eugenics” was first used by **Sir Francis Galton** in 1883. He believed that, just as farmers breed better animals, human society could produce better people through selective breeding. The idea spread quickly in the early 20th century, especially in Europe and America, and influenced social policy, science, and literature.

In literature, eugenic thought often appears through themes of **heredity, purity, degeneration, and social fitness**. Writers have used it to question what makes a person “fit” or “unfit,” “pure” or “impure.” Some supported eugenics as a path to progress, while others exposed its cruelty and injustice.

In English literature, especially during the modernist period, authors such as George Bernard Shaw and T. S. Eliot explored eugenic and evolutionary ideas in different

ways Shaw through utopian speculation, Eliot through cultural and moral decay. In Hindi and Indian literature, eugenics appeared indirectly through the idea of caste, purity, and social inheritance. Writers like Munshi Premchand and Mulk Raj Anand showed how birth and heredity control human destiny in Indian society and called for reform. Although the novels of Chetan Bhagat do not directly discuss Eugenics, they can be connected to it through their portrayal of social selection based on education, class, caste, and family status.

This paper studies these two traditions to show how the concept of eugenics — broadly understood as the connection between heredity, worth, and improvement — is represented and challenged in English and Hindi literature.

Importance of a Comparative Study of Eugenics in English and Hindi Literature in Literary Research

1. Understanding the Intersection of Science and Literature

Eugenics, emerging from scientific discourse, deeply influenced early 20th-century thought. Literature in both English and Hindi absorbed and reflected these ideas — often critically. A comparative study allows literary researchers to examine how scientific ideologies shape

narrative, character, and moral imagination in distinct cultural contexts. This enriches our understanding of literature as a site of dialogue between science and society.

2. Revealing Cultural Specificities and Shared Human Concerns

While English writers such as Aldous Huxley, G.B. Shaw, or H.G. Wells engaged with eugenics through dystopia or satire, Hindi writers like Premchand, Jainendra Kumar, or Yashpal addressed related concerns through moral realism and social reform.

Comparative analysis highlights: How colonial and postcolonial contexts altered the moral perception of scientific progress How language and culture mediate global ideas, transforming them into locally relevant narratives. This contributes to comparative literary studies by tracing both universality and specificity in literary ethics.

3. Ethical and Philosophical Dimensions in Literature

Eugenics raises enduring questions about human agency, morality, and social hierarchy. Studying its literary representation in two linguistic traditions allows scholars to explore: The ethical imagination of different societies & The role of literature in critiquing or

legitimizing power structures. This supports deeper theoretical work on biopolitics, posthumanism, and moral philosophy in literature.

4. Expanding Postcolonial and Transnational Literary Studies

The discourse of eugenics was shaped by imperial networks of knowledge. By comparing English and Hindi literatures, scholars can trace how colonial power relations affected the reception and resistance to scientific modernity. Such research enriches postcolonial studies, revealing how Indian writers negotiated imported scientific ideologies within indigenous moral frameworks.

5. Contribution to Interdisciplinary Literary Methodology

This study encourages a dialogue between literary criticism, history of science, and cultural studies. It pushes literary research beyond textual analysis into the intellectual history behind the text — a hallmark of modern literary scholarship. It also develops methodological tools for studying how scientific discourses are transformed by literary imagination across languages and cultures.

6. Relevance for Contemporary Literary Scholarship

As modern genetics, AI, and bioethics revisit issues once raised by eugenics, literary research on these themes helps understand how narrative shapes public understanding of ethical science. Thus, the comparative literary study becomes a historical mirror and moral guide for interpreting contemporary concerns about human enhancement and social inequality.

7. History of Eugenics in English Literature

Eugenic ideas became widely discussed in England at the turn of the 20th century. Scientists, politicians, and writers debated heredity, degeneration, and social control. In beginning, Francis Galton published *Hereditary Genius* (1869) and founded the Eugenics Education Society in 1907. H. G. Wells, in *A Modern Utopia* (1905), imagined a world run by a scientifically controlled elite. George Bernard Shaw discussed eugenics in his Fabian socialist writings and plays. Modernist poets and novelists, including T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, and Virginia Woolf, expressed anxiety about degeneration, fertility, and social decay — ideas deeply influenced by eugenic discourse.

Thus, by the 1920s and 1930s, eugenics was not a fringe idea but part of mainstream British culture. English literature mirrored these debates,

sometimes with hope for progress, sometimes with fear of decline.

History of Eugenics in Indian Literature

In India, eugenics arrived through colonial science during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, the idea of improving heredity and purity of birth was not entirely new to Indian thought. Long before the Western term “eugenics” was coined, the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) had its own concepts related to hereditary health, moral purity, and reproduction.

Ancient Indian texts such as the Manusmriti, Ayurvedic treatises, and Upanishadic writings contained discussions on how proper living, marriage, and dietary control could ensure “uttama santati” — literally, “noble or good offspring.” In Ayurveda, particularly in texts like the *Charaka Samhita* and *Sushruta Samhita*, one finds detailed guidance on garbha sanskar — the preparation of body and mind for conception to produce healthy children. This idea is similar to the early eugenic belief in planned and healthy reproduction, but the goal in IKS was moral, physical, and spiritual balance, not racial superiority.

The ancient Indian system emphasized that the quality of progeny depends on karma, character, and environment, not only on

physical traits. Hence, while there were hereditary notions of purity (especially in caste-based systems), Indian philosophical tradition largely linked “good birth” with ethical and spiritual discipline rather than biological control.

Later, in Indian literature, eugenics arrived through colonial scientific influence. Between 1900 and 1940, British and Indian reformers debated heredity, health, and social purity. Thus, eugenics merged with traditional beliefs about heredity and social hierarchy.

- Articles on eugenics appeared in Hindi and Urdu journals such as *Madhuri* and *Prabha* during the 1920s and 1930s.
- Some Indian reformers discussed “healthy marriages,” “racial improvement,” and “strong offspring.”
- Writers like Premchand and later Mulk Raj Anand did not write about scientific eugenics directly, but their works reflect and question the social eugenics of caste and colonialism — systems that decide a person’s worth by birth.
- Contemporary Indian Writers like Chetan Bhagat write about social concerns, middle class aspirations, youth challenges and struggles so that they can bring change in society.

Thus, while British writers used eugenics to discuss biological improvement, Indian writers used it to criticize social inheritance and inequality.

Methodology

This study follows a comparative literary approach.

1. **Selection of authors:** Premchand and Mulk Raj Anand represent the Indian context; George Bernard Shaw and T. S. Eliot represent the English modernist context.
2. **Textual study:** Writings of mentioned authors are read for references to heredity, birth, degeneration, purity, or improvement.
3. **Comparison:** The paper identifies points of similarity (inheritance, reform) and contrast (biological vs. social eugenics).
4. **Interpretation:** The goal is not to label authors as eugenicists, but to show how literature reflects and transforms these ideas.

Eugenics in English Literature (specifically from G. Bernard Shaw & T. S. Eliot)

1. George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950)

Shaw was fascinated by science, evolution, and improvement of the

human race. He believed that society could evolve through intelligent breeding and education.

Example 1 – “Man and Superman”

In this philosophical comedy, Shaw presents the idea of the Life Force, a creative power striving to produce superior human beings. The character Tanner says:

“The Life Force ... is trying to make a man who can do without a father and mother.”

This shows Shaw’s belief in a **directed evolution**, an idea close to eugenics. Nature, he suggests, seeks stronger and wiser generations.

Example 2 – Public Lectures

Shaw once said: “We should find ourselves committed to killing off the old and the weak.” Although controversial, this shows how deeply eugenic thought influenced him. However, Shaw’s final aim was not cruelty but **rational improvement** of humankind.

Summary: Shaw believed in a kind of **utopian eugenics**, where science and willpower could perfect humanity. His plays reveal both faith in progress and fear of degeneration.

2. T. S. Eliot (1888–1965)

Eliot's poetry reflects the mood of decay and infertility in modern civilization. While he did not promote eugenics directly, his imagery and criticism show cultural and biological concerns about the future of mankind.

Example 1 – “The Waste Land” (1922)

Eliot's most famous poem portrays a barren, sterile world: “What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish?” The repeated images of **infertility and waste** echo the eugenic fear of degeneration — that modern humanity has lost its vitality.

Example 2 – “The Hollow Men” (1925)

He writes: “We are the hollow men / We are the stuffed men.” The phrase represents people who have lost moral and spiritual substance, symbolizing a decaying race. This is not biological eugenics, but **spiritual eugenics** — a call to regenerate the human soul.

Summary: Eliot's works turn the biological fears of eugenics into a **moral and cultural warning**. He calls for regeneration through spirituality, not through breeding or heredity.

Eugenics in Indian Literature (specifically from Premchand & Mulk Raj Anand)

1. Premchand (1880–1936)

Premchand explored the **caste system, poverty, and social injustice** — all of which connect to the idea of inherited “fitness.” His characters often suffer because of the accident of birth, and his stories reject the idea that heredity should determine worth.

Example 1 – “Sadgati” (Deliverance)

In this story, Dukhi, an “untouchable,” is exploited by a Brahmin priest and dies from exhaustion. Premchand writes: “He was born only to serve, to suffer, to die; not even death can free him from his chains.” This line shows how **social heredity** acts like eugenics — deciding who deserves dignity. Premchand's tone is sympathetic and reformist; he condemns the cruelty of birth-based judgment.

Example 2 – “Karmabhoomi” (The Field of Action, 1932)

Here, the hero **Amarkant** rejects caste barriers and marries across caste. Premchand writes: “No man is high or low by birth.

Work alone is the mark of a man's worth.”

This statement directly **challenges the logic of hereditary fitness**, the core of eugenic and caste ideology.

Example 3 – “Godaan” (The Gift of a Cow, 1936)

The peasant **Hori** dreams of social respect through owning a cow. Premchand portrays how social systems preserve hereditary inequality. The novel ends tragically, showing that society itself practices eugenic exclusion — deciding who lives with dignity.

Summary: Premchand’s writing exposes caste as a form of **social eugenics**, where birth defines destiny. His response is humanistic — all people are equal regardless of heredity.

2. Mulk Raj Anand (1905–2004)

His novels criticize caste, poverty, and exploitation, presenting heredity as an unjust social prison rather than a biological reality.

Example 1 – “Untouchable” (1935)

The story of **Bakha**, a young sweeper, shows how society imposes impurity by birth. Anand writes: “He was aware of his own dirtiness, of the inadequacy of his being, a feeling that was born in him, bred in him, and would not leave him.” This line echoes **internalized eugenics**, where social ideology makes

Bakha feel biologically inferior. Anand exposes how society’s obsession with purity destroys humanity.

Example 2 – “Coolie” (1936)

In this novel, **Munoo**, an orphaned labourer, is trapped by poverty and class. Anand writes: “He had been born only to work, to be used up and thrown away.” Here, social heredity replaces biological heredity — Munoo’s “fitness” is determined by his poverty. Anand uses the cruelty of this system to condemn inequality.

Summary: In Anand’s work, the eugenic idea of purity becomes a symbol of social oppression. His writing calls for moral and emotional regeneration rather than biological control.

3. Chetan Bhagat – (2004 to Till Date)

While Chetan Bhagat’s novels do not explicitly address eugenics, they explore social mechanisms of selection based on education, class, caste, and family background.

Example 1 – “Five Point Someone” (2004)

In *Five Point Someone*, the IIT system creates a hierarchy based on academic performance, where students with lower

grades are viewed as less capable and less valuable.

Example 2 – “11 Rules of My life” (2024)

Chetan Bhagat emphasizes physical fitness, emotional discipline, and communication skills as essential for success

Findings

1. Historical Difference:

- In **England**, eugenics emerged from science, Darwinism, and modernity.
- In **India**, it merged with caste, purity, and colonial social order.

2. Different Forms of Eugenics:

- English writers (Shaw, Eliot) treated eugenics biologically and culturally.
- Indian writers (Premchand, Anand) treated it socially and morally.

3. Attitudes Toward Heredity:

- Shaw saw heredity as something to control and improve.
- Eliot saw heredity as symbolic of cultural vitality.
- Premchand and Anand saw heredity as a tool of oppression that must be overcome.

4. Shared Anxiety:

Both groups worried about degeneration — whether of the body, mind, or society. Literature became a medium to discuss fears of decay and hopes for improvement.

5. Moral Outcome:

- Western eugenics often aimed at perfecting the human species.
- Indian reformist writing aimed at equalizing humanity by rejecting birth-based inequality.

6. Transformation in Literature:

In both traditions, literature humanized eugenic thought. It questioned who has the right to judge others as “fit” or “unfit” and emphasized compassion over control.

Conclusion

The comparative study of eugenics in English and Hindi literature reveals that while both traditions engage with heredity and human improvement, their purposes and meanings are very different.

English literature (Shaw and Eliot) reflects a world influenced by science, evolution, and the fear of decline. Eugenics appears as a serious intellectual idea, sometimes utopian, sometimes tragic. Shaw wanted to improve humanity through reason & Eliot wanted to purify culture through faith

Hindi and Indian literature

(Premchand and Anand) reflects a world of caste and colonial injustice. Here, eugenic logic already exists in social hierarchy, and the writers use literature to oppose it.

Premchand wanted to **liberate the poor and untouchable** from hereditary bondage & Anand wanted to **restore human dignity** through compassion.

Thus, Both literatures show that the true measure of civilization is not in breeding

or heredity but in **justice, empathy, and equality**.

Thus, literature turns eugenics from a science of exclusion into a **lesson of humanity**. The various aspects of study can be summarised as follows-

Aspect	Literary Research Value
Historical	Reveals how literature responds to scientific ideologies
Cultural	Highlights cross-cultural adaptation of global ideas
Ethical	Explores moral imagination and critique of modernity
Theoretical	Enriches postcolonial, biopolitical, and transnational studies
Methodological	Strengthens interdisciplinary and comparative literary analysis

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