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Narrating the Nation and Culture: A Study of Shashi Deshpande's *3 Novels*

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The general trend of *3 Novels*, if one may chart, is something like this: the curious children bump into clues leading to the fun-filled adventure that alters not just their lives but the face of the entire society. Needless to say, their bumpy adventures always end on a happy note, making them the star of their family. The happy ending that ensues as an outcome of the discord that child protagonists discover/ explore/ resolve is a characteristic element of children's books. Whereas the setting of the first novel, *A Summer Adventure*, is a small town, the native place of the three siblings, the second novel, *The Hidden Treasure*, is based in a village and the last, *The Only Witness*, takes one into the streets of Bombay, the city to which Ravi belongs. The children travel to all these places only to find themselves fully immersed in the mysteries that await them in each location. While it is the small-scale robbery of the household goods in the first novel, in the second, it is not just the treasure of children's grandparents which is at stake but also the sacred idols of Lakshmi and Narayan, the revered gods of Hindu mythology. Similarly, in the third novel, it is the large-scale robberies in which the robbers attack national banks. Although mystery unravels largely due to these three children, it would not have been possible without the participation of minor characters. Interestingly, most important minor characters in all three novels are also young - Shanta, Satish, Joe, respectively. The adults also participate in the events, although their contribution remains minimal. Having outlined the three novels very briefly, the present paper aims to discuss and critically scrutinize the issues in these novels in the light of various theoretical positions that emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century.

One common thread that binds the three novels and grabs young readers' attention, it seems, is the fact that these novels are written in the adventure-tale format, with a detective string as its sub-category. It is widely acknowledged that in the adventure series, Robinson Crusoe (1719) by Daniel Defoe and Gulliver's Travels (1726) by Jonathan Swift have been marked as the forerunners. But truly archetypal adventure tales for children began roughly with Robert Louis Stevensons's Treasure Island (1883). According to M.O Grenby, the twentieth century influential works which introduced children solving crimes and exposing criminals include the Hardy Boys series (1927 onwards), Nancy Drew (1930 onwards), Enid Blyton's Famous Five and Secret Seven (from 1942 and 1949). In fact, Famous Five (1942 onwards) is the most popular series in the west. It is among the pioneers of detective stories with the protagonists with super powers out on a mission to eradicate evil. There have been many Indian books inspired by and imitative of Blyton's adventure tales. The need to 'Indianize' these books has been an approach consciously imposed by publishers/ critics/ readers on the Indian writers writing in English. This demand is almost like an 'antidote' to the influence of English-culture and books. If the novels written in India in English language are moderately infused with elements clearly identified as (exotic) Indian, then it apparently redeems the writers of betraying the local languages. This, according to Prema Srinivasan, is the "Indian alternative" (quoted in Superle 110). If the Indian novels for children works on the lines of Blyton's mystery and school stories, then Superle calls this alternative the "Indian Blytonnade" (Superle 110). The stories, thus, constructed include visibly Indian settings and culture in addition to the Blyton stories-like format. No matter how much it runs the risk of

homogenization, this is to teach the children about Indian landscape and other structures. This drives home another relevant point regarding children's books. The adventure tales, as Grenby contends, provide a 'frame' for children's stories to re-emphasise the didactic element, using the structure of adventure for morality, history, and so on. Moreover, these stories teach children to be empathetic and loving towards fellow human beings, instead of making war and causing harm.

Like other literature, children's literature also portrays an eternal conflict between the good and the bad. The child protagonist is often at odds with various antagonistic forces present within the family or society. In The Hidden Treasure, the family members of the child protagonists (Dinu, Minu, Polly, and Ravi) are clearly the loving and caring lot as opposed to the Master and his comrades. While Kaka, Kaki, Roopa, Sarala, and Mohan seem cordial and affable, the Master is simply cruel and ruthless. He ill-treats his wife and turns fiendish with Satish, his student, causing him physical harm. Similarly, *The Only Witness* differentiates the good adults from the villains. Whereas the former (Ram mama, Auntie Veena, Mai, etc) are courteous and awe-inspiring, the robbers are rude and wicked, who shoot a guard at one of the banks, do not pay Joe for his services, kidnap Sanju, and so on. The neighbours of the children in *A Summer Adventure* 'The Pears' are also inhospitable and the "meanest people" according to Minu. They are typically unfriendly and "certainly very queer!" (28), clearly making them the opposite of their own parents who are pleasant, optimistic and ever-welcoming. Having mentioned this, it is also significant to uncover how well versed are these criminals in the art of deception. They put up pretence to conceal their uncouth personality and dishonest motives. For instance, Govind in the novel *A Summer Adventure* is a remarkable fraud so much so that it seems almost impossible to not just the child protagonists and their family but also to the readers to accept that he was involved in the mysterious events and robberies. He is clever and manipulative enough to befriend one and all in the neighbourhood, thus gaining access to their trust as well as houses. Moreover he is least perturbed in portraying his uncle, Dhondu, in a bad light, misleading child detectives' suspicion. Therefore, the events truly turn topsy-turvy towards the end when the two girls, Minu and Polly, reveal Govind's true colors. It is disclosed by the colonel that Govind "always was a petty thief" (90) and so were 'the Pears', and together they had initiated a series of robberies in their otherwise peaceful town. In a similar fashion, in *The Hidden Treasure*, Sadashiv Master, deceives everyone around him, even his friend *kaka*, until his surreptitious plot is uncovered by the courageous children. The Master, who is the village tutor, is 'supposed' to be a learned man, which he is not. Yet he has had many children under his tutelage, including Mohan, Sarala, Roopa and Satish. All this seems plausible until Dinu and Ravi find him scolding his pupil Satish whose frequent visits to the old house may ruin the Master's secret operation. It is also to be noticed that part of his warning involves 'silencing' Satish. He instructs Satish, "Remember, you are not to go there again. You are not to talk to anyone about it. You are not to talk at all." (160). Ironically, Sadashiv Master has taken his tag of a teacher/ master too seriously for he considers himself to be the 'master' (social superior) of not just Satish, but the entire village. Mr. Shukla, Sadashiv Master's companion, is quite similar to Govind (in *A Summer Adventure*) in befriending the children and then deceiving them. He introduces himself as "a teacher of history" (155) and gains the children's admiration and trust for being a learned, helpful, affable, and witty man, only to be exposed for what he really is, ". . . a rogue who steals old idols, carvings, and things like that, and sells them for a huge profit" (248). In addition, the fact that Shukla is not even his real name and the police are looking for him for a very long time, point to his delinquency that the author aims at making the child readers skilled to stay away from. Reading books to get grip

on the kinds of wicked people in the society is one option; the other more accessible option is parents' guidance on what and who is to be trusted.

Interestingly, the encouragement these child protagonists get from their families for what and how they learn is also noteworthy. According to M.O Grenby, "Families have sometimes been represented as constrictive, especially for girls. But the majority of children's literature has endorsed the relationships between siblings, parents and children, and ancestors and descendants, as more liberating than limiting" (140). For child readers, family is constructed in such a way that it represents a well-bonded unit, with a focus on familial-values such as love, care, safety, empathy, and so on. This is demonstrated in the aspect that the deeds that children accomplish by the end would not be possible without the supportive unit of siblings, parents and relatives. In fact the adventure stories, as was mentioned earlier, provide a frame for other things, one of which is bonding between children as well as adults. For instance, when Ravi comes to stay with the trio Dinu, Minu and Polly, he is not that pleased to be in their small town, having experienced a comfortable lifestyle in Bombay. When Amma introduces Ravi to the three children, there seems to be a clear difference of opinion between Dinu, Minu and Polly on one side and Ravi on the other. Yet when the three siblings spark off a series of adventures, starting with the petty race up the spiral staircase towards the clock, Ravi is enthusiastic and game for it. Little did the children know then that this chase is going to take them to situations full of mysteries which will bring Ravi closer to the three siblings to form their own little squad of young detectives. Their visit to the Pears' house brings in new possibilities and their first assignment, for it is here they come across the girl with timid eyes, who is to play a significant role. It is later that the children discover that this girl, Shanta, is a captive of the Pears. Although the "kids felt sorry for the girl" (27) from the beginning, they could do nothing for her till the Pears were exposed. Meanwhile, Minu and Polly befriend Shanta, which culminates in something quite substantial for the latter. Similarly, the plot (The Hidden Treasure) introduces Satish as a "disagreeable" boy (110), who is not just "rude" (111) but also "nasty, awful" (116). He misbehaves with Roopa, scares poor little Polly with the cobra story, throws mud in Dinu's eyes, among other mean things. Yet as the mouthpiece of an optimistic children's story, Minu claims ". . . you never know. He may turn out to be a good chap, after all" (111). And he does turn out to be a "good chap" somewhere in the middle when he realizes his mistake of participating in a serious crime. Satish, who appears erratic and indifferent in the first half of the novel, seems to be the poor victim who cries "No! No! I'm no good! I'm not!" (176). Part of the adventure, then, also involves liberating Satish from the clutches of the villains who mistreat him. There are numerous instances that highlight how such ill-treatment is affecting him psychologically. Likewise, Joe, in The Only Witness, is exploited by the bank-robbers. He is Minu's age (about fifteen or sixteen) but there seems to be a stark difference between the two, at least initially. Just like Satish, he seems impolite and ill-mannered in the first half of the novel. He keeps calling the children "brats" and sets off an argument quite often. But soon enough the children and the readers get a glimpse of Joe's benevolence, apparent from his affection for and attachment with Bruce Lee, his pet dog. It is because of Bruce that the children start interacting with Joe, resulting in a familiarity which soon turns into friendship. Joe's initial uneasiness/ hesitation may be due to the unlikeness between Ravi's house, which seems full of warmth, care and love, and Mr. Shiv Shankar's apartment where Joe gets nothing but ill-treatment and neglect. It is in the company of these children that Joe finds solace, otherwise all he does is "work, work, work" (322). Minu is the first to notice the rare sight of Joe smiling and thinks that Joe looked quite different and "really nice...what a pity he did not smile more often" (311). In the end, it "All Ends Well" Joe is ultimately liberated as the adults "promised him they would free him from the orphanage" (378). Just like Joe, Shanta

and Satish too are freed from the clutches of their so-called masters and ". . . it ends happily" (93) for them as well. It is worth mentioning that all the three rescue-missions result in something quite meaningful, strengthening the bond of companionship between children as well as the adults, such that in the end all of them seem to be forming one large family where each helps the other and the world becomes a better place to live in. At least that is what seems to be happening in the imagined idealized world of child readers, where these three poor children, Shanta, Satish and Joe, have apparently received everything by the end.

Adventure stories for children have another significant appeal. Children's literature as a separate body is consequential because it gives space to the hitherto marginalized community of children. Yet, it is also pertinent to probe into this newly found subjectivity. Even if the didactic feature has never completely faded, it still leaves scope for the child characters to participate in the events. This participation is easily detectable in the plot which involves adventure and mystery. The frame this kind of storyline provides fulfils the "child's desire for consequentiality" (quoted in Grenby 175). If it is not for the mystery, the child protagonists have nothing to do but eat, play and sleep as exemplified by these lines: "The very first day of the holiday and the children were feeling bored! It was strange, but they just did not seem to know what to do in the afternoon. Kaka and Papa were busy talking, Kaki and Roopa were busy and Mohan had gone out somewhere" (114). It is because they stumble upon some clues, that these ". . . unimportant . . . neglected and often victimized . . ." (Grenby 173) children become the centre of all attention. As soon as they discover their adventure ride, these, otherwise vulnerable and dependent, children escape into a world full of danger and excitement, a world which gives them a possibility to prove their worth to the overprotective adults. According to Grenby, this world of adventure helps the child accomplish her "fantasy of empowerment" (174), simultaneously making her the ideal hero(ine) for the child readers to emulate. Having experienced the peripheral position all their lives with a lot of instructions and warnings about what to do and what not to do, child characters as well as child readers experience the prospect of playing a significant role in the society and perhaps prove themselves superior to the adults.

In The Only Witness, this happens when Dinu reads in the newspaper one fine day about the mysterious bank robberies that have shaken the city in terror. He reads:

Four masked men held up a branch of Indian Bank today in a daring raid and got away with an estimated four lakhs.

The bank, which is located in one of the city's busiest areas, was almost closing down when the raid took place. The main door had already been closed and the armed guard, who normally stood at the entrance, was at the moment inside the bank. He, like the other customers got the shock of his life on seeing three masked, armed men appearing inside. They made the customers and the staff stand with their faces to the wall, the guard being disarmed first. The cashier was forced to hand in the entire amount he had. The whole operation took scarcely four minutes.

The bank staff, who tried to ring up the police as soon as the men had disappeared, found that the telephone lines had been cut. The police are inclined to believe that the robbery was committed by the same gang which had in the past three months, robbed four other banks. The modus operandi in all the four cases has been, according to the police, very similar. None of the customers, it is learnt, have been able to give the police a clue to the identity of the three men. (284)

Now the thing to be observed here is that none of the 'customers' or 'staff' had been able to do anything. More importantly even the police appear helpless without outside help. Also, this gang of three robbers is not one of clumsy amateurs but thieves highly efficient in their modus operandi for they have a foolproof plan with everything sorted out before hand, from the telephone line to the stolen ambassador. Therefore they have successfully robbed "four other banks." However, since it is a children's novel with a bunch of very clever children they immediately come up with a plan to 'help the police.' First, "Sanju can tell Padma what this man looks like . . . Padma can draw him . . . and we can go to the police with the picture and tell them who it is" (285). Similarly, in A Summer Adventure the burglars who execute their plan of action in one house after another never seem to get caught by the police. This is the reason for DSP's anger and other police officers' helplessness. In both the cases, the children appear to be more efficient than even the police force in getting the robbers caught. Obviously such a portrayal of audacious children has its own pedagogical reasons behind it. Apparently it is the belief of children's writers that children should be prepared from the beginning " . . . to encounter all kinds of risks, in order to prepare them to meet and grapple with the risks and dangers incident to man's career with cool, cautious self-possession . . . ." Corollary to this can be the inclusion of children in supposedly serious 'adult-like' issues. Many educationalists, writers as well as critics, one of whom is Erich Kastner, take this move to be highly political because it gives children/youth the opportunity to participate in the national responsibility on an equal footing with adults to regenerate a society/ country free of corruption.

When the young citizens imagine themselves to be a part of the national mission, the optimistic vision of many (Indian) authors writing children's books gets fulfilled. These child protagonists are constructions of a fertile imagination which wants to see an improved face of India. This has been especially true of Indian literature for children because children and the youth have shared the responsibility of re-constructing the nation from the scratch after independence. Therefore, the impulse of any book should be taken into account because it is usually "purposeful". Grenby furthers this argument by stressing how this impulse inspires in the readers' imagination particular national/ cultural attitudes. This is a typically political enterprise. This is particularly plausible vis-à-vis the content of children's books which work towards fostering in the young perceptible mind the dominant social and cultural reality. It is for this reason that children's books imagine a utopia where severest of crimes can be erased easily by a group of optimistic children. As discussed earlier, the notion of nation which gets constructed in the children's stories is quite political, one which thrives on the hegemonic worldview. A similar chain of thought is reflected in Michele Superle's discussion of children's literature when she claims that it is a part of the "aspirational literature with a transformative agenda" (4). While the transformation that results into betterment may seem harmless, it always runs the risk of oversimplification and homogenization. Superle's argument is that contemporary English language Indian children's literature envisages empowered children who generally belong to the (upper) middle class. These middle class children (are made to) imbibe the national ambition as construed by adults and thus execute the same. It is essentially the authors' utopic vision, Superle asserts, that the most dangerous and difficult goals can be accomplished by the self-righteous children. But most of these aspirations and solutions are ". . . far from realistic. In actuality, the idealistic solutions they imagine are unlikely to transpire with the ease with which they are shown to unfold textually." (8). Deshpande's novels have plenty of such examples; one of which from The Only Witness has already been discussed above.

It is also believed and contested that Indian writing in English as well as children's literature needs to justify its purpose by promoting 'Indianness.' In the context of children's mystery

books in India, this phenomenon results into Indian "Blytonnade" as discussed above. Paradoxically the prerequisite to 'Indianize' children's books in India sometimes results in the production of an exotic India. However, Deshpande claims that she is against the construction of India in all its exotic charm. Although she despises taglines, the reproduction of Indian cultural markers in her novels for children certainly renders them constitutive of the larger postcolonial endeavour. Since 'Indian-ness' as a concrete entity does not really exist, the significant question that needs to be asked is who decides what is authentically Indian and what is not. Moreover, how does one distinguish between Indian and non-Indian, especially in the context of post-independence India? The task of the critic then is to be conscious of what gets passed as Indian content, and what gets marginalized in the process, for in presenting India to the world, typically the dominant facet (Hinduism) is upheld, sidelining the others which produces a homogenized static 'appealing' India, India which is in sync with the dominant stereotypes in the Indian as well as the western minds. Whether this is validated in Deshpande's novels for children through certain dominant markers or not is what concerns the study at the moment.

If Deshpande's novels for children are full of Indian cultural markers, which they are, one needs to scrutinize the effect it creates on the child readers. These makers can be classified into two broad categories: in the first category can be placed food and clothing (consider for instance the difference between Lambani women's attire and Ravi's shirt), and in the second category there are the culture/ historical artefacts. According to Superle, children's fiction establishes ". . . children's love of and connection with the food of their culture and nation" (116). Since food is a cultural signifier, it also helps in the nation building project. A careful display of a nation's food thus turns out to be a politically inclined activity. Naturally love of one's food items draws connection with the one's national roots. Yet, it also poses a danger of regional differences. Further, Superle asserts that the use of food furthers the construction of a specific kind of Indian childhood. In 3 Novels, the children are always "too excited to eat' (13) and everyone eats such a lot from *gulab jamuns* and *bhajias*, green chutney, mango sherbet, *puris* and pickles, *paranthas* stuffed with potatoes, *chikki*, peanuts, *shrikhand*, *puri*, *batata wadas*, *papads*, *dosas*, *bundi laddoos*, *bhelpuri*, *idlis*, *biyani*, to cakes and ice creams. These dishes are visibly Indian, and in showing that children can gulp loads of such delicacies, the novel clearly assumes their love and loyalty towards India. However, whether it is legitimate to identify the presence of these dishes as loyalty to 'India' is slightly problematic since all these dishes are somewhat specific to the two regions, Maharashtra and Karnataka, that Deshpande is most familiar with. Moreover, the problem that Superle has with such a presentation is that children only passively devour (and enjoy) what the adults cook for them. In other words it is not only the image of India which the adults dictate and children absorb, but also the portrayal of India as static which children learn to acquiesce to.

In continuation of the same argument, cultural and historical artefacts (domestic or national, including the national anthem) figure in all the three novels under consideration consistently in direct and indirect ways. Consider, for instance, "The Old House" in *The Hidden Treasure*, which looked like a "wonderfully mysterious place" (114), is actually a historical building which belonged to the children's ancestors. This building has the aura of an ancient monument in which the children's ancestor had buried his treasure to safeguard it from the British. While this instantly highlights the child protagonists' typically Indian roots, it also places the novel in a typically Indian context, a context where the children's ancestor had "helped one of the Peshwas in a war" (134) against the British. Through such revelations, the story draws our attention towards an important facet of Indian history where Indians had to constantly wage wars against the British to safeguard their personal and national heritage. Religion is another important aspect that adds to the Indian quotient of the novel. The

children also discover a puja-room, further stressing the Indian appeal of that huge house. A puja-room also figures in the siblings' house in A Summer Adventure, where a lamp is lit before the idols of gods as an everyday ritual. Also, in kaka's village there is a Hanuman temple, from where the treasure is ultimately discovered. The reference to the idols of Hanuman, Lakshmi and Narayan, the revered deities of Hindu mythology, along with the "religious books" (165) that are found in their ancestor's house is an indication that all these are inherently intertwined with the mystery tradition from the west. Therefore what is quite interesting from the approach of Indian-ness that should make its mark in the contemporary English-language Indian children's literature is that there seems to be a perfect amalgamation of Indian culture, tradition, religion, language, literature and history with English tradition and literary tradition.

At the same time what should be noted is that Deshpande makes sure that nowhere does she produce an essential/exotic image of India. As a novelist for children she appears conscious of how there needs to be an intermingling of two worldviews and things associated with them. There is a sense of balance vis-à-vis characters from the rural and the urban India, all working together towards a single national mission. Yet it does seem awkward, ambiguous, and inconsistent that there are only Hindu deities, Hindu cultural markers and Hindu children with the motto 'unity in diversity'. While the criticism against her for not having included non-Hindu groups cannot be negated, one cannot admonish her either for homogenizing India. While it is not that simple to let go off the middle-class hegemony, the novels are anything but homogenous for all three are thickly populated with characters, from Kaka who resides in a village to the child protagonists, who live in a small town, to Ravi who is from a metropolitan city; from the uneducated orphans, Shanta and Joe, to the exceptionally affluent Vinod; from the domestic help Sitabai to Sita, the *Lambani* woman; each one has visibility such that the claim that the novel uses the lower class/caste people in a token manner and revolves 'only' around the middle-class protagonists seems groundless, especially in the context of Shanta, Satish and Joe. Moreover, the novel is neutral about language. This argument may sound absurd for the entire novel is written in English, but a closer analysis may reveal that the text is flexible enough to incorporate other material/ dialects. For one, there is the appearance of some Hindi words. The presence of phrases/ words like "gutters" (63), "Chalo, Abdul" (86), "Chalo Dilli" (107) is a testimony that there is an acknowledgment of at least as many dialects as there are professions (farmer, teacher, doctor, domestic help, colonel, writer, artist, army officer, and so on). In A Summer Adventure, whenever the children want to talk about their clandestine mysterious cases, they talk in English "so that Sitabai shouldn't understand" (17), an indicator that sometimes they do converse in Hindi. Similarly, in the chapter "Explanations- and Off To Bed," when everybody is celebrating the happy ending and discussing about the rewards, the colonel "suddenly turned to Dhondu and switched over from English" (93) to inform him about his reward for his assistance, the narrative is clear in highlighting that the medium is other than English. In The Hidden Treasure, Kaka clearly makes a travesty of English language which the children have become habitual of using in everyday life. He is not that fond of English as the children are, "What English! Kaka scoffed. 'Write no Amma.' Okay no Amma. Then no come Ravi" (102) sounding like a master of verbal jugglery. Likewise, for Shanta, English is a "strange language" (89) as "strange and rough" (236) as is Lambani language for these children. Moreover, the novels clearly range over vast linguistic zones, for example, there is most probably Hindi (used by the villagers, domestic helpers, etc.), there is also the language that gypsy women use, then the cryptic language of the ancestors (which may be a dialect of Sanskrit or Tamil) which can only be read by priests well-versed in that linguistic alphabet. Whereas instances such as these justify Deshpande's refusal to take side vis-à-vis English

language, another acceptable fact that the novel espouses is the respectability that education in English language and literature promises. *A Summer Adventure* and *The Only Witness* end on the note where it is made obvious that a shift in Shanta's and Joe's status in the society will be made possible due to the 'proper' education that they will now receive. At the same time this also highlights how both girls and boys have an equal claim to education.

A common feature of contemporary children's literature in India is that (middle-class) girls are equally valued as boys. These girls, believes Suchismita Banerjee, also claim central position and contribute equally to the plot. They are smart, clever, witty, active, courageous, etc, in short all those things that had seemed lacking in the earlier representation of girls in children's novels. Feminist ideology appears to be making a mark through such portrayals, quite evident from the number of girl characters that are portrayed in each novel. To be further noted is the fact that these girls are not just present, but are also capable of competing as well as cooperating with boys in contributing to the national goal. This has been partially made possible due to ". . . the fact that these texts are primarily written by women" (Superle 38). The reason, as Sunder Rajan contends in "Fictions of Difference", is undoubtedly women's better understanding of 'child sensibility'. An additional reason provided by postcolonial critics, like Roderick McGillis, presumes the correlation of traditionally silenced voices in reclaiming their identities and in this light the connection between women authors and child characters/readers seems inevitable. Shashi Deshpande seems to confirm this hypothesis. In the three novels under discussion, there are two boys (Dinu and Ravi) and two girls (Minu and Polly) as protagonists, who seem equally clever, equally brave, and equally kind towards fellow people. In all the three novels, Minu and Polly's hard work and effort are no less than their brothers, Ravi and Dinu, to solve the mysteries and restore peace. According to Michele Superle, this kind of authoritative girlhood, which seems to demand its own space, is based on ". . . complex negotiations between gender and tradition" (40). Moreover, one clearly established fact about Deshpande as a writer is that she attempts to re-write Indian womanhood/ girlhood, which then seems to be an esoteric hybrid of tradition and modernity. Superle calls this new entry in the majority of contemporary Indian children's novels written in English 'the new Indian girl'. For her, these girls are a realization of the dream of gender equality in the post independence India. Clearly constructed on the ideals of liberal feminism, the female protagonists are educated, well-informed, and empathetic towards other victimized groups. This is clearly visible in the reactions of Minu and Polly on meeting Shanta (*A Summer Adventure*). When the Pears chide the girl with a "very dirty little face" and "big and timid" eyes, they feel "very sorry for the girl" (27). Likewise, when Govind catches the girl red handed with Polly's gold chain, Minu and Polly show utmost empathy and plead to let her go. When that goes unheard, they also take the initiative to rescue that poor girl from the little shed behind the house, only to find themselves trapped in the same closet. Fortunately, the time the three girls spend together in the shed gives Minu and Polly a chance to befriend Shanta. This friendship proves beneficial for not just Shanta, but also the entire neighbourhood, for it is Shanta whose disclosure about Govind unravels the mystery. Thus, the adventure comes a full circle when Govind is caught and Shanta is rescued. Having freed her, the girls introduce her to their family, which welcomes Shanta with open arms, once again drawing a contrast between the sensible/sensitive adults and irrational villains, "the Pears" who have been mistreating her for a long time. Now Shanta has ". . . become their friend, pupil (Minu was teaching her to read and write), admirer, and Amma's devoted helper" (103).

While this may seem a perfect ending, Superle is disappointed with how this obscures the fact that it is primarily the educated, middle-class girls who get that empowered status of protagonists, who have to do nothing but look for an adventure to while away time. The 'new

Indian girl', who has gained access into contemporary English language Indian children's literature and established her monopoly, is then a title which is the exclusive property of those who are English-educated and 'cultured'. Therefore, a part of Superle's analysis includes the uncovering of the hierarchy that lies underneath the protagonists'/ author's liberal feminist approach. Girls from lower economic classes, Superle argues, are ". . . either absent from these texts or portrayed as deficient and reliant on new Indian girls to rescue them" (41). Further she believes that the true picture of the majority of girls in India is far less fulfilling, therefore the characterization of such happy-go-lucky girls is an ideal that India is yet to achieve. In her examination of Deshpande's *A Summer Adventure* she critiques the portrayal of Shanta, who irrespective of the improvement in her condition ". . . eventually becomes the servant in the protagonists' family" (41). Also, Shanta's "own desires are never made clear, she never vocalizes her personal goals . . . remains passive and dependent" (42). Superle further denounces this kind of western liberal feminist approach which imagines gender equality but winds up propagating conventional class as well as caste structures. In the light of how the story progresses, this may seem a plausible argument, in fact even true, albeit partially. But the question that is more relevant here is how valid is it to discredit Deshpande's novels for replicating such class and caste hierarchy.

Superle's analysis of Shanta's character appears only one-sided, taking into consideration only the aspects which further highlight her downtrodden/ victimized situation. Consequently she fails to take note of the fact that Shanta is essentially portrayed as a "brave girl" (92) against all odds. Shanta, who is introduced into the narrative as "girl in torn clothes with "big and timid eyes", a girl who has a "scared look" on her face at almost all hours of the day, is actually an indispensable part of the novel. Although she is shy, cannot understand English and does not belong to the middle class, without her the children would have never been able to unveil Govind's involvement in the mysterious robberies. It is Shanta who passes on some information about Mrs. Pears' brother and later on she also reveals, to Minu and Polly, Govind's facade. So even if she has been used as a pawn to exhibit the middle class girls' liberal feminist views, she is never shown short of the kind of potential that one sees in Minu and Polly, such that her contribution/ input for the local cause is as much, if not more, than the other children. As for the fact of her being a lower-class girl, and getting transferred from one household (the siblings' house) to another (colonel's house) is slightly discomforting. But at the same time, one needs to acknowledge the diversity Deshpande has attempted to present. Although initially she is not "loved, well-fed, physically competent, secure, obtaining an education, able to take initiative, and supported and respected by both parents" , she achieves almost everything by the end in the protagonists' house. When the children get to know from the colonel about Shanta's endeavour to uncover the mysteries by herself, they are awe-struck and think "what a brave girl!" (92), through which she also gains their respect. And chances are that she will not be a "poor girl" any more, as Dhondu is kind enough to give the reward money to her. Moreover, she now has a house to stay in, "She'll stay with us, said Amma promptly. 'Will you like to stay here, Shanta?'" and "The girl smiled." (93). Superle's argument that Shanta is not given any voice stands nullified precisely because of two reasons, first that neither Amma nor the girls force/order her to stay, and second, the girl's affirmation is more than apparent in her smile on being asked if she would like to stay.

Apart from Shanta, there are two more children who are to be conventionally sidelined as minor characters, Satish in *The Hidden Treasure* and Joe in The Only Witness. Perhaps Satish, who is unfriendly and cold for nearly half the novel, is also from a village. His mother has sent him away to live with Kaka and Kaki on the account that his father is ill. He is not well-versed in English either. So, initially he seems to be just another minor character

spreading nuisance and causing discomfort if nothing else. It is when the narrative goes about creating curiosity about 'the old house' that Satish emerges as a significant thread. What seems to be most noticeable about his ambition is the fact that he wants to be 'rich' and own "three cars", an echo of the Master's own ambition. The novel highlights how he is ". . . tired of living in this village in a dirty old house . . . he wants a lot of money" (227). Although Satish may have confessed that he was drawn into that terrible secret because he wanted to partake of something that was quite adult, essentially it may have something to do with this child's psyche. Satish, who is deeply hurt by the fact that his parents have abandoned him, seeks some measure to gain everybody's attention. What keeps his fascination for cars alive is the fact that cars and a lot of money will fetch for him everybody's love, envy or whatever it may be. Satish's emotional insecurity that results from abandonment issues has scarred him a little such that he now pretends he does not care for anybody. He states "I hate you. I hate you . . . When I have all that money, I'm going to buy three cars. And I won't ever take you in any one of them. I won't even let you touch them. I'll show you!" (130). The spirit of vengeance that is visible in the last line is again an example of how Deshpande's novel is not merely using this 'minor character' for the purpose of the plot. Satish's portrayal is as complex as the other children in the novel, perhaps even more. Midway, of course, he realizes his fault, an insight that saves not only him but also the treasure. But then (t)his happy ending has its own lesson, as Mohan claims "A new school for everyone . . . Isn't it better than three cars for one boy?" (259). What better way to teach the benefits of an egalitarian society can there be? However, as conscientious as it sounds, the question of class discrimination is never truly solved in Deshpande's *3 Novels*.

Like Satish, Joe, in The Only Witness, also appears cold and unfriendly at first. Although he can speak English, it is later revealed that he has not had the luxury of as many facilities as the other children. He is described as a ". . . young boy, about fifteen or sixteen, with long, curly, untidy hair, wearing dirty denims and even dirtier T-shirt" (299). He also informs the other children that he is sometimes hit by his 'masters'. As his equation with his 'masters' makes clear, he, at the age of fifteen, is a working boy, work which he does not really enjoy, but something that he is forced to do. He cannot hit back, he cannot escape such ill-treatment because he has "no money at all" (322). At this moment, the narrative establishes a clear contrast between Joe and the other children, for it is described how the children go to picnics and visit a planetarium, whereas all Joe does is "work, work, work" (322) for which he has not been paid for months. So while Dinu, Minu, Polly and Ravi have been spending their lives eating, playing, solving mysteries, Joe's childhood has been nothing more than an illustration of child labour and exploitation. Before his acquaintance with these four kids, he has nobody; no parents, no friends, no relatives, except Bruce Lee, his puppy. Later on, when they become friends, Joe joins their squad unconditionally (like Shanta and Satish) as a secret informer who promises the children that he will bring Sanju back. As he executes his plan even the police, of whom Joe has been scared from the beginning, are indebted to him. The reward that good deeds always fetch at the end of children's novels gets Joe all the respect, love, care, freedom from the orphanage, education, and even a promise of a "good job" that he has been missing all his childhood. And Mai, out of maternal affection for all children, also feeds him and gets him new clothes.

Interestingly, in all three cases the parents are absent (either dead or away). Is this to be read as further establishing the importance of parenting in a child's life? A convenient and conventional approach will decipher the message as highlighting the right kind of education which starts at home with the 'right kind of parenting'. Apparently the four children who live with their parents have absorbed the 'right' pedagogy that they are true to their personal cause (saving their neighbourhood and ancestral property) as well as to the national one

(getting the robbers arrested, liberating Shanta and Joe and upgrading their condition). It appears that parenting plays a very significant role in children's lives, otherwise they are led astray by villains as is evident in all three cases: Shanta, who is an orphan, is enslaved in the Pears' house and ill-treated to the extent that she is frightened even to speak; Satish is away from his parents because his father is ill, as a student of Sadashiv Master, he is manipulated into 'stealing' from Kaka's cupboard that important document which contains information about the treasure; Joe is equally miserable because of his enslavement at Shiv Shankar's apartment as a result of having escaped from the orphanage. All three seem to be losing the spark characteristic of teenagers, since they have not experienced as pleasant a childhood as Dinu, Minu, Polly and Ravi. According to this explanation, these three children, Shanta, Satish, Joe, should not have the value system that the supposed child protagonists possess and display. Now here arises an ambiguity regarding the traditional concept of childhood. If a child's mind is a clean slate, tabula rasa , then these three characters should have become wicked by the age of fifteen or sixteen, since what they have experienced or learnt till now is nothing but treachery, deceit and villainy. Yet these three demonstrate quite the opposite of it. They too possess the accepted 'right' morality as soon as they realize that they have been in the company of villains. For instance, Shanta, who has lived with the Pears all her life, knows how to differentiate between right and wrong. She does her bit by passing on the information to Dhondu who then reveals it to the colonel. She even tries to catch Govind red-handed and hence follows him through the garden. Similarly, Satish realizes his fault and is guilty. He confesses how he stole the relevant documents for the Master. With this awareness, Satish decides to take the matter into his hands and correct his own wrongdoing. Significantly, with the change in his attitude, for a reward he gets the "happiest" news of his life that "his father . . . was much better" (259). Joe's situation is no different. He falls into the trap of the robbers and is then bound to work for them, getting nothing in return except ruthlessness and bad mouthing from his masters. Unlike Satish, Joe knows for a very long time that he is working for troublemakers who are also ruining his life. Therefore, it is not just for his retribution but also for his ethical obligation that he saves Sanju's life. And like Satish he gets his reward. It is important to note that in all three cases realization goes hand in hand with the violence that is afflicted on these children. To conclude, it will not be completely wrong to claim that all the child characters in these novels, Dinu, Minu, Polly, Ravi, Satish, Shanta, Joe, are to some extent alike. Despite very different socio-economic circumstances, they have similar fears, similar bravery, and similar moral system. As for the question of gender and class, Deshpande does aim to provide optimistic solutions, even if they are at individual levels. All the three children, earlier marginalized, are well-resourced by the end and seemingly pleased with their lives. While "Nothing is as lovely as a story with a happy ending" (377), the solutions to discrimination on the basis of class and gender in a matter of 20-30 lines are simplistic. Moreover, a key element of that solution is education. Although there is nothing wrong with education, in fact it is the building block towards progress, what books are made available to children is equally important.

It is accepted that the kind of books children read has a deep impact on them. Naturally it leads to a major concern in the children's literary criticism as to what kind of books are 'given' to children or what kind of texts do child readers 'select' for themselves. This element of selectivity is crucial because texts construct not just children's reading but also children. What concerns this study at the moment is what kind of effect does reading have on children in 3 Novels. Significantly the novels' have for protagonists children who are quite interested in reading and writing such that the novels emphasize once again the importance of correct learning, education (language and literature) and pedagogy. According to Peter Hunt, "One of the major concerns of those who work with children and books is literacy, and it may seem

obvious that children's literature can be an important tool in the acquisition and use of language" (1999:151). So it is quite early that the reader finds Minu correcting Polly on her wrong usage of words and spelling errors, such that the characters and the readers form a virtual community of learners gaining access to language and culture simultaneously. In the process, the readers (presumably young) learn that it is not "round, round staircase" but a "spiral" one (12), your maternal uncle's son, Polly asserts, is not your "brother" but "cousin" (25), an "accomplice" Ravi explains "means a helper" (33), "lime pickles" (72) Minu describes is someone who is in the game but does not count, "shorthand" Mohan clarifies "is a short way of writing" (168), "a pow-wow" others enlighten Polly "means a talking over" (192), and so on. Apart from this, the children are also shown to be avid readers, reading whenever they find time in between food and mysteries. While this may be to inculcate in children a reading habit so that they grow up to be as knowledgeable and clever as the child protagonists, the selection of books appears slightly limited. 3 Novels in this sense possesses a self-reflexive quality, opting only the mystery/ adventure books that inspire the protagonists to imagine themselves ". . . going all over the place with a magnifying lens and finding clues no one else ever would" (23). Having read "Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot" (23), Dinu plans to uncover all the mysterious events by himself. Minu is equally bold and confident about their own little squad that she does not understand why do they need ". . . to tell Papa, or the police" about any of the clues. The children seem to have mastered the art of investigation such that they can "Look for footprints" (45) to find how the girl's earring came into their compound. It is "Ravi who had been reading Sherlock Holmes too" (46), who is the first one to hint that the girl (Shanta) can be involved in the entire chaos. Having moved on to the next setting, Kaka's village, the children carry with them books, such as Hardy Boys, Phantom comic, Tintin, for a pleasant time. In Bombay, Ravi owns "heaps of books and comics as well" (265) and so does Vinod who possesses "Archie and Tarzan and Richie Rich". The involvement, identification and inspiration that these children procure from the books they read are typical characteristics of children's literature. That the protagonists are portrayed in a way that readers identify with them such that Dinu and Ravi become Sherlock Holmes and Watson simultaneously, Minu is Humpty Dumpty and so on. Similarly, the readers of 3 Novels are supposed to identify with and imagine themselves to be either Dinu or Minu or Ravi or Polly.

Apart from the identification with characters and vocabulary building, it also involves expansion of general knowledge, especially national and cultural. These children, who hail from the middle class and are English educated, know a lot of things about history, culture, language, etc, such that Kaka is made to declare "Goodness, the things kids know nowadays. I never knew that." (107). The Hidden Treasure, especially, is an attempt to transmit knowledge about India during the time of Indian struggle against the British. This is made feasible because the children know that ". . . one of our ancestors had helped one of the Peshwas in a war" (134). It is the curiosity of the children regarding their roots that results into Sadashiv Master's classroom lesson about the past, ranging from questions pertaining to the year of the Mutiny (1857), where it began (Meerut), who was first involved (Peshwa-ruler of the Maratha kingdom), to the point of how "came the battle and the Peshwa lost. The Rani of Jhansi was killed. Tatya Tope escaped." (143). Meanwhile, rumours about their ancestor were afloat. Whether he went to Kashi or Nepal, one couldn't say but ". . . he was never caught by the British and he never came home" (143). Whereas the purpose of this chapter "The Story of the Treasure" seems harmlessly educational, the didactic tone never fades entirely. Firstly, the children are meant to imbibe the courage that their ancestor and others like Madhav Rao Peshwa and Rani of Jhansi exhibit during the time of need. This is starkly visible in all the three adventure tales when and where these audacious children solve

the crimes without being bothered or scared for their own lives. Just like the above mentioned national fighters, they are clear on their aim (although partially unconscious about the shortcomings!). Secondly, the fact that the story involves India versus British, it teaches the children to be loyal to the national cause like their ancestor was. Most importantly, it upholds the spirit of co-operation (amongst the national heroes/ heroines) that the children truly display in all three novels when fighting against villainy/ crime/ corruption. Michelle Superle defines co-operation as a bunch of people working together to "secure a mutually beneficial result" (62). For her, co-operation, however natural it may sound, is a socially cultivated value. It is for this reason that children's books are full of examples of co-operation such that it is inculcated in a person right from her childhood to construct her as a humane and sympathetic individual. 3 Novels testifies this postulation. Based on the ideal vision of Indian leaders, Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, the spirit of co-operation is an utmost necessity if a nation dreams of emancipating itself from the debris of both international and intra-national conflicts. This is the reason the narrative unfolds with an unfailing hundred percent success rate of solving mysterious crime. Superle also reads the acts of co-operation in *The Hidden Treasure* and claims:

> Characters of this novel do surmount their diverse social, geographical and economic backgrounds to pursue a shared goal, which they achieve by cooperating . . . . This co-operation in pursuit of a worthy goal by the children, and the widespread investment in the well-being of the children by the adults, draws attention to both the ability and necessity of every member of the group to contribute to the cause. (64)

This is fairly evident in Mohan's acknowledgment that "Everyone helped" and "Each did his bit" (252). This is an example, according to Superle, of how children's books in India are a realization of the ideal dreams of the national leaders, Mahatma Gandhi ('essential unity of humanity') and Jawaharlal Nehru ('unity in diversity').

The next in the list of things needed to be discussed vis-à-vis these novels is the narrative. An attempt needs to be made to scrutinize the narratives of all three novels and analyze how far these run the risk of turning into ideological forces. According to Perry Nodelman, any effort of the narrator which is comprehensible by children in children's books is necessarily "filtered through adult ideas of what it means to be child childlike." (210). This is another way of saying that the narrator has resemblance with ". . . someone much like the actual author" (Nodelman 210). Therefore, for Nodelman, adult narrators and the adult authors for children, "share a distinctive set of character traits." (210). This kind of narrator is first and foremost friendly yet very adult, is omniscient who not only entertains but also controls child readers. Time and again, the notion that gets stressed is that the narrators are different from child characters as well as child readers because unlike these two, adult narrators partake of authors' adult experiences as well as terminology which is in turn manipulated to suit the children outside and inside the text. It is precisely for this reason why the sound argument seems to be always about child readers identifying with child protagonists and never the narrators. An adult narrator is planted to not just supervise but also colonize the child's mind in a particular way such that the child ". . . does not escape the bounds of reason and good sense they so clearly lack" (Nodelman 211). The narrator is then that moral police which teaches them about their own lack of rationality and adequacy. However, it is interesting to note that this narrative/ colonial voice is not inhumane, but is extremely friendly and subtle, such that the children do not sense a didactic overtone they so condemn. In *The Case of Peter Pan; or, The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (1984), Jacqueline Rose asserts that this narrative voice has evolved over the years; the narrator who seems friendly now was earlier "explicitly didactic and repressive" (quoted in Nodelman 212). But she also asserts that

nowhere should this fact be seen as the narrator's distancing from the didactic ideology. It only highlights how successful ideology has been in rendering the didactic element as an invisible and acceptable aspect of any children's book. Taking all these points into consideration, let us now look at the trilogy. The presumably indispensable narrator reveals the major section of the plot. In dealing with mysterious plots, the most obvious and significant function of the narrator is to keep the excitement alive. To fulfil this prerequisite, the narrator possesses the power to decide what is or can be given to the children and what is to be hidden. This raises important questions regarding the authority of the narrator as well as the author.

The narrator is apparently a substitute for the author, first and foremost, by the fact that the narrator is omniscient, who knows not only about authorial intention but also the characters' mindset. Consider the following lines from *A Summer Adventure*: "Amma warned in a stern voice which meant she had to be obeyed" (6), "All of them had so much to tell their mother that it seemed no time at all before they were home" (7), "The children were too excited to eat. They gulped down their food, kicking each other under the table, and bursting into giggles at times" (13), "The kids loved short cuts and never walked along the roads if they could help it" (16), "Mothers were terribly smart in finding out things they were supposed to know nothing about" (47), and so on. Such statements abound in The Hidden Treasure too along with the introduction of the characters by the narrator: "Kaka, their father's elder brother, was fond of loud jokes and funny tricks" (100), his visits were "Noisy, boisterous. He had a habit of turning up any time, specially when he was least expected" (101), "Ravi was the children's cousin. He had stayed with them for a few months while his parents were abroad and since then had spent each holiday with them" (102), "Shanta was the little girl who had got innocently involved with a nasty couple, part of a gang of thieves. It was partly due to her that the thieves had been caught. And the children . . . had felt very sorry for her." (103). The narrator also emphasizes the peculiarities of locations, such as Kaka's village where "Most of the houses were very small, made of mud and looked dark inside . . . Most of the houses had some kind of platform just outside, on which the men sat and smoked, or chatted together." (124). Similarly, the narrator in *The Only Witness* frames children's opinion about Bombay, who ". . . had imagined Bombay as sparkling and shining. Instead, these buildings were old and grey, with plaster and paint peeling them off, and washing flapping out of every window, in every balcony" (264) and the ample "neon signs advertising all kinds of things, their ears deafened by the noise of buses thundering past, their noses and throats irritated by the fumes from cars, buses and taxis." (270). Outlining the multiple functions of the narrator might suggest that the narrator discloses all the implicit elements in the text. This assumption, however, does not hold true for the mystery novel where the narrator is supposed to keep the readers enticed till the end. This is an important speculation hinting towards the issue of 'selectivity' that has variously surfaced. So it happens in Deshpande's novels for children that the narrator, an invisible presence throughout, lures the readers further into the text by giving not so subtle hints about the approaching adventure. A characteristic feature of the narrators of all three novels is how they offer light yet crisp hints at the end of some chapters, adding to the curiosity manifold. For instance, the narrator of *A Summer Adventure* reveals how "Tomorrow was to bring very exciting news indeed . . . news which plunged the children into a most exciting adventure" (19). A similar revelation happens in The Hidden Treasure when the narrator discloses how the children ". . . were marching towards a very fascinating adventure, though they did not know that as yet" (132). Having experienced the adrenaline rush in the first and the second novel, how can the children be glued to the third novel if it is not for a similar adventure ride. And so the narrator

has to disclose right at the beginning that "Whatever Bombay was, one thing was certain. It was terribly exciting." (279).

Considering all these instances, it will not be wrong to say that whoever the narrator is (the author or an independent creation), one thing is quite evident. The apparently harmless all-knowing narrator(s) whose purpose is to connect one character to another, enjoin one storyline to the other, is symbolic of the duality consistently noticeable in children's books. It is the narrator's worldview, supposedly an amalgamation of the author's experiences and opinions, which gets passed on to the readers in an unconscious manner. This case points to the interpellation of young as well as (passive) adult readers into the dominant Hindu ideology or stratification of society on the basis of class that the novels uphold for the narrator never truly offers to the readers anything apart from Hindu structures and cultural values. All this information gets further complicated by the debate that Deshpande recreates her own childhood in *A Summer Adventure*.

Due to all these reasons, the conclusion of this paper, unfortunately, cannot be as happy as the ending of the novels. The gaps and fissures that Deshpande has always claimed to explore and fill for her women protagonists in the other novels, such as That Long Silence, remain implicitly exposed in her books for children. Paradoxically, *3 Novels* takes up the issues pertaining to class based and gender based discrimination but in a rush to accomplish a happy ending, it tends to oversimplify these issues by providing an easy solution in each case. Unlike Shanta and Joe, not every unfortunate child can get a foster home and foster parents as easily as it is portrayed. Similarly, in portraying heterogeneity in her novels by portraying women from rural (Kaki, Lambani women) as well as urban India (Amma, auntie Veena), the novel does try to portray a wholesome picture of India. However, the attempt to portray the women as well as some men from the rural India as optimistic and carefree necessarily manipulates the harsh conditions as a result of poverty and lack of resources. It may be argued that to demonstrate a hale and hearty society which is more or less a necessity in children's literature, Deshpande gets distracted into a vision which is biased right at the base.

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