



**Landscape as a Tool for Nation-Building: A Study of Sonia Mehta's
Discover India Series for Children**

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that 'landscape' has been used as a 'tool' in Indian English post-colonial children's literature for the task of nation-building. To validate my argument, I have taken up Sonia Mehta's *Discover India* series as my primary text to study the representation of the Indian landscape for children through the aesthetic of 'picturesque;' namely enumerative, engineered and antiquarian. It has also been argued that such a 'picturesque' representation of the Indian landscape helps in shaping, moulding and creating responsible, curious and knowledgeable young citizens which further accelerates the nation-building process; where the term 'nation-building' pertains to the post-colonial project of building the nation by creating a sense of shared identity through art, literature, science and narratives of history.

Keywords: landscape, children's literature, Indian English, picturesque, nation-building

Landscape, as a word was first used in English in 1603. It is derived from the Dutch word 'landscap', meaning region. W. J. T. Mitchell in his book *Landscape and Power*, discusses two major landmarks in the study of landscape. The first is the modernist view which he calls contemplative, that aimed at reading landscape through the visual medium. In the second approach (interpretive), associated with postmodernism, landscape has been read as a text. He merges both the approaches to create a model that would not only focus on what landscape "is" or "means", but what it does and how it works as a cultural practice. (1)

With the aim to make 'landscape' a verb from a noun, Mitchell establishes that "landscape (whether urban or rural, artificial or natural) always greets us as space, as environment, as that within which "we" (figured as "the figures" in the landscape) find – or lose – ourselves". (2)

Equating landscape with identity, he further considers landscape “as a medium of exchange between the human and the natural, the self and the other.” (5). Hence, identifying landscape as a verb, one can arrive at a point where the idea of landscape and a sense of identity are dynamically related. The physical terrain and its experience converge into a dialectical relationship.

In the context of Indian civilization, the idea of territory existed right from the ancient times. In *A History of Indian Literature Vol VIII*, Sisir Kumar Das suggests that the idea of territorial unity in India is as old as the Indian civilization and is not merely a “response to a colonial rule, nor is it a mere by-product of the national movement.” (4). He gives examples from Mahabharata, where the idea of Bharatavarsa is conceived on the basis of its geographical and cultural territory.

In the Bhishma Parva (IX Section) of the Mahabharata, Sanjay describes Bharatavarsa, a geographical and cultural territory, identifiable by its rivers Ganga, Sindhu, Saraswati, Godavari, Narmada, Vitasta, Sarayu etc, by its mountains, Mahendra, Malaya, Sahya, Vindhya etc, and its provinces, such as Kuru-Panchal, Surasen, Matsya ... (Das 4)

Das argues that it was even in the medieval period, that India was considered a unified cultural place, as Amir Khusrau in Nuh-Sipih (Nine Skies) has talked about the Indian territory and culture. This perception of a united Indian territory created by the poets, seem to be more stable than the political boundaries of nation and state because this forms the Indian psyche (4). During the colonial period, the vision of India was elaborated through songs like ‘Jana Gana Mana’ and the poem ‘Bharat Tirtha’ by Tagore who celebrated its rivers, mountains and the multi religious population.

In order to cultivate and disseminate a sense of nationalism and a vision of the imagined India, a new category of reader came up to the forefront. This was the category of the ‘child reader’. As Das writes, “The potentiality of another section of readership that was realized in this period was that of the children” (Das 31) The child reader was introduced by the adult reader about the idea of motherland which made them fall in love with their own country.

Ten years ago, Bengali children didn’t even know that they had a country of their own. They didn’t understand the concept of a motherland very well. Surendra babu has extraordinary oratorical skills; and it is through this skill that he has inculcated a love for their own country and countrymen. (qtd in Dasgupta 101)

Thus, children were included in imagining a new India through its landscape. They were also given information about the history, geography and mythology of their own homeland. The periodicals

would regularly feature the “illustrated features on such distant regions as Kashmir, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Orissa, Assam, and the Deccan, replete with accounts of language, dress, food and customs of people inhabiting these places” (qtd. In Dasgupta 115).

After India gained Independence in 1947, the urge to rediscover India accelerated. In order to build a newly independent nation, the past heritage of India and future prospects based on science, were integrated. It is in this context, that the literature for children was introduced: to acquaint the children about their social and cultural heritage, as well as to enrich them with the modern knowledge system. Thus, I use the term ‘nation-building’, especially with reference to the post-colonial project of building a shared sense of social and cultural identity through children’s literature.

Jean Webb in her seminal article, “Text, Culture, and Postcolonial Children’s Literature: A Comparative Perspective”, asserts that children’s literature produced in the colonies were a part of the reactive literary movement in order to establish a separate identity. In the process, she offers a theoretical perspective on the development of children’s literature in post-colonial nations. The three patterns of cultural development that she lists down are:

- 1) Establishment of separate identity by reflection on landscape and a sense of cultural self.
- 2) Forcing through the dominant cultural by constructing and reconstructing myth.
- 3) Realizing identity by rewriting of history. (72)

This pattern can be applied to India as well, for India was also a colony of the British empire, and children’s literature in post-colonial India consist a plethora of works on the Indian landscape, myth and history. In this paper, I shall only take the first pattern from the list, that is the representation of Indian landscape. However, I digress a little with Webb, by calling the above-mentioned patterns of ‘landscape’, ‘myth’ and ‘history’ as ‘tools’ and not ‘patterns’ because ‘tool’, as a word, can be used as both, a noun and a verb. As a noun, it pertains to an ‘instrument’ and as a verb, it derives its origin from the Old English word ‘tawian’ meaning to shape, drive, prepare, equip. Thus, the dynamic nature of the word ‘tool’ aligns well with the transitory nature of childhood. Hence, I argue that these are tools or instruments used in children’s literature in order to equip, shape and prepare young minds for the nation’s future.

Sonia Mehta, in her *Discover India* series has taken up the task of introducing the children to Indian geography, culture, ethos through the trope of journey and travel. The book set *Discover India, State by State* consists of thirty books, twenty – nine books for each state and one book for all the union territories. All the books in the *Discover India* Series consist of three major characters- Mishki, Pushka and Daadu Dolma. Mishki and Pushka are siblings who have come from the planet named Zoomba. They have travelled many places on Earth “but they have never, ever seen a place like India.” (Mehta 2). The third character is Daadu Dolma who “is a wise old man who has lived on Earth longer than the mountains and seas. He knows everything about everything.” (Mehta 3) Daadu Dolma is Mishki and Pushka’s guide all around India. Along with the three characters, the reader’s involvement in each book seems quite conspicuous, as the back cover of each book is addressed to the child readers. It is the readers who have been taken on a journey with the three characters as their companions.

Picturesque India

As far as viewing a landscape is concerned, the most common aesthetic that is taken into consideration is that of the picturesque. It was an artistic concept that emerged in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, with the basic concern of pictorial representations of landscapes in its most attractive form. The idea was later contested and expanded by Richard Payne Knight who argued that “aesthetic experience was dependent on the beholder, on memory, association, and context” (Hill 123). This implied that the representations and experience of the picturesque could mould the observing eye – the traveler as well as the reader. In the *Discover India* series, the representation and experience of various places in India can be categorized into variants of the aesthetic of picturesque. This would help in moulding and shaping the identity of the child readers and the travelers, which in turn would contribute in the task of nation-building.

Enumerative Picturesque

The enumerative picturesque involves the “statistical, topographic, and cartographic.” (22) Narrative cartography uses actual maps within stories to provide supportive evidence. (Caquard and Cartwright). I am taking the cue of enumerative picturesque from Pramod K. Nayar’s *Indian Travel Writing in the Age of Empire, 1830 – 1940*, where he mentions the aesthetic of the enumerative picturesque in the context of imperial – subject’s travelogue and how it “fractures the aesthetics of the traditional picturesque (22).

The *Discover India* series do not use actual maps but each state is introduced with a web link to its actual location on the map of India. The section on 'Neighbours' give detail of the neighbouring landform as well as water body. For example, in the book *Off to Nagaland* the section 'Neighbourhood Joy' mention the details of the neighbouring states of Nagaland: "Sitting right in the middle of a hilly terrain, Nagaland has just four neighbours – Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Assam, and Myanmar. It's a tiny little state, but it is rather well – known" (Mehta 6).

Apart from the location of each state along with their respective neighbours, each book has a section 'On the Map' which gives the link to find the exact location of the respective state on the website *mapsofindia.com*. For example, in *Off to Maharashtra*, 'On the Map' section mentions "To see exactly where Maharashtra is on the map of India, go to <http://www.mapsofindia.com/maps/india/india-political-map.htm>" (Mehta 6).

Thus, these 'cartographic signifiers' (Cromley 307) as a part of enumerative picturesque "are steps towards the making of the knowledgeable traveler because it makes use of both the aesthetic and the epistemological observational modes of documenting." (Nayar 25) The landscape no longer remains an imaginary space. It is a real existing space that can be mapped. Such detailed observations create practical and knowledgeable child readers who are virtually travelling along with the characters. It creates a sense of real space, an India that exists out there in real and is no longer just a part of the imaginary.

Engineered Picturesque

Engineered Picturesque describes the "apparent harmony between human bodies/labouring bodies, machinery and the landscape (rural or urban)" (Nayar 31). It is similar to the industrial picturesque "where nature, architecture, and human activity appear in harmonious balance" (31). In the engineered picturesque, the human actions on the land is not erased as it is done in the traditional picturesque aesthetic. The importance of land use, labour, and land prospects can be seen through this aesthetic.

In *Discover India* series, each book consists of sections like 'Bricks and Stones' and 'Working Hard' which stand as the aesthetic of engineered picturesque. In the section, 'Bricks and Stones,' the different kinds of houses and buildings constructed in different landforms is shown. It depicts how people build houses based on landforms. In *Off to Himachal Pradesh*, the section 'Bricks and

Stones' mention Kathkuni houses. The description shows the harmony between man and nature through the houses they build. Apart from the description of houses, villages and cities; the series also gives a dedicated section to the professions in which people are involved. On the one hand, traditional labour is reflected through farming, weaving, and fishing and on the other, India is shown as a progressive nation bustling with industrial and technical skills.

The architectural signifiers are examples of engineered picturesque as they situate humans in tune with nature. Such representation aims at an informed wonder, where India is made up of hard-working people who try to strike a balance between the traditional and the modern. This balance is pivotal in taking India towards its prosperity and progress. The child readers as well as the travelers witness the human labour behind the development of India and as citizens they can also contribute towards future possibilities. For example, in *Off to Jammu and Kashmir*, Pushka expresses his desire to settle there for the rest of his life, to which Mishki asks, "Oh yeah? What will you do for a living then?" (Mehta 40). Hence, the importance of labour is coupled with the beauty and peace of the place. It is not enough, even for a child to settle in a place merely to relax and enjoy; one has to work and put in effort. The blend of fun and labour, thus prepares the young travelers to undertake their future endeavours with pride and confidence. It is hard work and labour, kept in tune with the environment that will help the nation progress, and children are being included in this project of nation-building.

Antiquarian Picturesque

The antiquarian picturesque strikes an emotion of nostalgia and greatness. Another strand to the antiquarian picturesque can be understood through Pablo Mukherjee's reading on Emily Eden's travels through India where he argues that:

antiquarianism focused attention on ancient ruins, not to celebrate their splendor, but to view them with a mixture of nostalgia and melancholy about the inevitable passage of time and the cyclical rise and fall of civilizations. (25)

Both the strands of thought can be combined to understand the representation of the antiquarian picturesque in the *Discover India* series. In all the books in the series, the section on 'Standing Strong' represents the historical temples, monuments, buildings, tombs. The architectural signifiers are from different ages and civilizations, yet they stand tall even today. They do evoke a sense of nostalgia but to the contemporary child readers and travelers, it is indicative of the fact

that civilizations have risen and fallen in India, yet the nation has contained and uplifted them all. These architectural splendor as well as ruins are symbols of India's assimilative quality. Be it the Jain caves in Tamil Nadu that are almost 1000 years old, or the Taj Mahal built during the Mughal era or the 400 years old Bom Jesus Basilica built in Goa, India has kept all of them strong. Thus, the antiquarian picturesque depicts India as an eternal and assimilative nation. This does strike wonder among the child travelers as they exclaim through expressions like "Wow! The Taj Mahal is the most wonderful monument we have ever seen!" (Mehta 34) or "Fort Aguada is a prison today! OOOH! SCARY!" (Mehta 35), but they do understand the symbolic reference behind these architectural signifiers, that they have to preserve and carry the narratives through generations. In *Off to Madhya Pradesh*, Mishki is so mesmerized by the forts that as an activity she wishes to write a poem about forts. The readers are asked to help her. "Mishki wants to make a poem about forts. She needs five words that rhyme with fort. Can you help her?" (Mehta 39). The readers and the travelers are not just expected to gather knowledge but they have to keep things in their memory and spread knowledge collectively. Such activities are indicative of the fact that children of the present generation can be trained to carry on the narratives of the nation which will serve as an important tool in building the nation.

Landscape, Travel and Identity

Initially Mishki and Pushka view India through the gaze of wonder and exoticism and later turn into knowledgeable, informed and involved travelers. Thus, their identities shift from wondering 'I' to an informed and matured 'I' who takes up various responsibilities in keeping the culture of India intact. The identity of the travelers is dislocated – "displaced location of the traveler away from his homeland and subsequent relocation as a mobile observer in a new land." (Nayar 20) This displacement and subsequent relocation is possible through travel as it "proffers an alternative mode of perceiving, forming and expressing one's identity" (Nayar 10). The travelers Mishki and Pushka are displaced from their homelands as they come from a different planet and are subsequently relocated in new lands. They are mobile observers and that helps them in being flexible with their observations. This further leads to a sense of open mindedness and a cosmopolitan attitude among child travellers. They find a state wonderful and decide to settle there, but eventually they move on to visit other states and find each state equally beautiful and fascinating. Hence their identities become mobile and unbiased towards any one place in India.

Along with the child travelers, it is the target child readers who are constantly involved in the travel. Each book in the series is addressed to the readers. Children are informed about their lack of knowledge because they have not been taught enough about India and are advised to pack their bags and get ready for the journey. The involvement of child readers in the entire series help them transform into responsible and assimilative selves and no part of Indian people and culture remains strange to them. They are also asked to maintain a diary after their virtual travel so that they can use them when they actually travel to that place. In that case they will have travelled the place twice with a better sense of cultural and geographical knowledge.

Conclusion

The series with its travelogues has tried to create informative readers who can look at India's wholeness through its fragments. There is a sense of continuity as there is no specific beginning or an end marked in the series. One can start with any state and go on to the other with various connections and differences. This is indicative of the idea of nation-building, where fragments unite to make a whole and each child can realize, that despite differences, they are a part of one nation. The analysis of the Indian landscape in *Discover India* series, through the lens of enumerative, engineered and antiquarian picturesque is pertinent in the contemporary socio-political scenario of divisive politics, demolition of heritage and art and degradation of the environment. Such a representation of the Indian landscape re-instills the idea of shared identity, heterogeneity and also encourages the young child readers to become responsible towards protecting the ethos of the nation as well as the environment. Thus, 'landscape' has been aptly used as a 'tool' in *Discover India* series to create and cultivate dynamic, informed, responsible and inclusive national and cultural identities of the young generations of India.

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