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All About H. Hatterr – Desani’s ‘Novel Gesture’

Abstract

The paper attempts to trace the contours of Indian Writing in English, especially novels, and to scrutinise G. V. Desani’s single contribution to the genre, namely *All About H. Hatterr*. Written during World War II and published several times since its first appearance in 1948, this 278 page novel about a severely marginalized Other with a postscript fictional defence of meticulously counted eighty paragraphs anticipates and outdoes Bakhtin in its carnivalesque heteroglossia, running riot with the language of the colonial masters in a manner that even Salman Rushdie would be proud to equal. The conscious self-reflexivity that begins ‘backwards’ with the travails of ‘printing-shrinking’ (to use a Hatterrism) is reminiscent of Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* with the one difference that while Cervantes’s protagonist constructs his identity within the novel, Desani’s Hatterr assembles the fictional space he subsequently inhabits as a series of episodic encounters inevitably culminating in ‘de-construction’ of the indubitable anti-hero. Starting with the ‘self’, Hatterr’s romp from one catastrophe to another debunks everything – from philosophy to psychoanalysis, literature to religion, morality to masculinity – engendering a hedonistic celebration of all that is politically incorrect. Despite the linguistic and narrative revolution presaged by Hatterr, both his author and his text have been relegated to relative oblivion in the annals of Indian Writing in English. My article humbly endeavours to re-discover this wayward maverick of Indian English of whom T. S. Eliot says, “In all my experience, I have not met with anything like it.”

Keywords: marginal antihero, self-reflexive narrative, carnivalesque debunking of self, linguistic and generic affiliation, re-writing/righting Indian Writing in English.

I

Indian Writing in English

Indian Writing in English is predominantly a twentieth century phenomenon though South Asian English literature can be presumably traced back to Sake Dean Mohamet’s publication of his *Travels* in 1794. The belief that ‘Indian Writing in English’ is a consciously constructed epithet to distinguish between native English authors and their colonial counterparts is strengthened when we note the absence of such designations like the Polish or the Irish writing in English for authors like Joseph Conrad or James Joyce. This distinctive categorisation prevents

the assimilation of such products in mainstream English literature earmarking an identifiable, separate space for its habitation, creation and circulation. However, the label is not merely an imposition that we suffer silently but one we collude in upholding for mutual benefit. English literature maintains its pure stock while an international voyeuristic market is created for Indian Writing in English with contract and sales figures that no regional author or publishing house can match.

II

Indian Fiction in English

Indian novels in English are generally categorized under two phases: in the first phase authors like Ahmed Ali, through works like *Twilight in Delhi* (1940), try to capture the true expression of Indo-Muslim culture by incorporating its sounds and poetic images or stalwarts like Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao, attempt to forge a voice/ voices of their own as distinct from the British in orientation and emphasis. As Muneeza Shamsiesays in "They made their mark," these writers were keen "to provide a very different view of India" than that projected by the colonial writers. The second group comprises the new breed of authors, who can actually trace back their lineage to Desani: Arundhati Roy, Vikas Swarup, Kiran Desai etc., with Rushdie leading the pack, who view themselves as writers from the empire that struck back (Wallia, *India Star*).

However, with the passing of time, both the groups together became, due to the worldwide accessibility empowered by their use of a particular language, the sole literary window to view and comprehend the real India from abroad despite the fact that only 5% of the Indian population are English-using bilinguals, as per figures cited by Braj Kachru, in *The Other Tongue: English across Cultures* (qtd. in Wallia, "Review"). Other linguists have cited comparable figures and some as low as 2% (Wallia, "Review"). The general impression of pervasive bilinguality and the centrality of Indian Writing in English in its 'homeland', albeit erroneously, is reiterated by articles like Rushdie's "Damme, This is the Oriental Scene for You" for those without direct contact with India. Its condescending title supports his basic premise that all significant Indian writing has happened only in English as opposed to the entire regional output which is merely 'parochial'! The power of such assertions to shape international opinion and re-write rather erroneously, the rich, hybrid Indian literary tradition cannot be underestimated. It is tellingly exemplified by the incredulous response of a Euro-American colleague of C. J. S. Wallia, a professor of English, to whom he quoted the 5% figure because, after reading Rushdie's essay, she was under the impression that at least 50% of India's population is fluent in English (Wallia, "Review"). A more unnerving experience was my own encounter with a British academic, an ardent fan of Rushdie, who challenged my Indian identity solely on the basis of my ignorance of Rushdie's work in 1995!

III

Govindas Vishnudas Desani

Born on 8 July 1909 in Nairobi, Kenya, to Sindhi parents, Desani was considered a naïve dreamer by his merchant-class family. "I like books," he insolently retorted when his father insisted he join family business. "You like books?" his father replied, "I'll buy you a

bookstore!” Reared and educated in Sind, India, he was hailed as a child prodigy, but considered difficult by those around him and was expelled from school at thirteen as ‘unteachable’. Years later, he avenged himself with a short stint as headmaster at the same grammar school! He ran away from home twice and was brought back. On his third attempt in 1927, he landed virtually penniless in England in 1927. Since the late 1930s and throughout World War II, Desani earned his living in England as an orator, a journalist, a teacher at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, as a BBC broadcaster, and also as a speaker on Oriental issues sponsored by the British Ministry of Information. His most famous lecture series was titled “India Invites.” Occasionally he assayed bit parts in films produced in U. K. to supplement his income (Life of a Twentieth-Century Adventurer).

Shoma Chaudhury, the Editor of *Tehelka*, reports that though chronically skint and living in a dismal, one-room basement flat in Chelsea with the toilet at the end of a cold courtyard, Desani was never short on confidence. Soon after the publication of *All About H. Hatterr* in 1948, he approached his friend Khushwant Singh, then the Press Attaché of Indian High Commission:

Can you recommend me for the Nobel Prize?”

Khushwant was dumb struck: “But you've only written that one book!”

“So?” countered Desani softly, “Eliot's written very little also!”

“Only Nobel winners can recommend others,” Khushwant protested weakly, taken aback by Desani’s total lack of modesty..

“No, even the Government can”, insisted Desani steadfastly.

Worn down by his persistence and ingenuous self-belief, Khushwant meekly signed the forms. Nothing came of it of course. The Nobel Committee checked with Dr. Radhakrishnan, Ambassador to Sweden and a nominee for the Nobel at the time. Totally unamused, he ticked Khushwant off roundly and Desani continued to live with his inconvenient loo across the courtyard until he took off for the Orient. (<http://www.dooyoo.co.uk/user/319051.html>)

From the early 50s to mid-60s, Desani studied Sanskrit, philosophy, occult, Buddhism, and Hindu culture in seclusion in India and Burma. He practised raja-yoga and meditation under various gurus, travelling to Japan for specialized guidance. Throughout the mid-'60s, he remained a regular contributor of an article series “Very High” and “Very Low” to the *Illustrated Weekly of India* then edited by Khushwant Singh. In 1970, he travelled to USA as a Fulbright scholar and initially taught at Boston University. Later, he immigrated to USA and worked as Professor Emeritus of Religion and Philosophy at the University of Texas, Austin. Post-retirement, he settled in Dallas. Ill and reclusive, he returned to Austin where he died on 15 November 2000 (www.mcphersonco.com/authors/gvdesaid.html).

IV

Desani’s Works

Desani’s published works are few and far between. *All About H. Hatterr*, written during World War II and published in 1948, earned the opprobrium of his colleague at the British Ministry of Information, Eric Blair (George Orwell), who chided him for such frivolity ‘amidst’ the war. *Hali*, a dramatic prose poem, serialized in *The Illustrated Weekly of India* and published by The Writers Workshop in a collection of modern poetry, was published as a single volume by

the London based Saturn Press in 1952 with a “Preface” by E. M. Forster. A complementary opposite to *All About H. Hatterr*, *Hali* encodes the writer's vision of cosmic creation and human destiny, marrying Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic and other Indian religious traditions into a cathartic drama. It was adapted for the London stage, broadcast over BBC radio, pirated three times and suppressed by the author for twenty years until it was republished with twenty three of Desani’s short stories in 1991.

Eclectic in nature, many of these stories and fables had been first published in literary anthologies and magazines since 1961, including *The Noble Savage* (ed. Saul Bellow), *Illustrated Weekly*, *Transatlantic Review*, *Boston University Journal* etc. Mostly humorous, they rely upon comic timing and incongruous anomalies in contemporary life. Their mood ranges from bleakness and sombre supernatural to the satiric. The titles convey a sense of the interpenetration of India's cultures in a wry yet penetrating way, “Suta Abandoned,” “Gypsy Jim Brazil to KumariKinshino,” “Country Life, Country Folk, Cobras, Thok,” “...Since Nation Must Export, Smithers” and others. “The Lama Arupa” follows the holy man of the title through “several states of consciousness” after his death until he returns as a chicken while “The Merchant of Kisingarh” is told by a deceased merchant speaking through his son, a sometime medium (www.mcphersonco.com/authors/gvdesaid.html).

Other works include *Mainly concerning Kama and Her Immortal Lord* published by the Indian Council of Cultural Relations in 1973. Apart from these, there are about thirty five contributions, papers and lectures published in various books, journals and periodicals and the unfinished *Rissala*— a compendium of his works that he was working on after retirement. Unfortunately this unfinished work is now untraceable. In 2007, the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, received his papers, including the original manuscript of *All About H. Hatterr*. A few other documents including pages from Nadi texts which Desani unsuccessfully attempted to get carbon dated were entrusted to the Boston University during his life. UNICEF was the beneficiary of the rest of his estate and future royalties (“Legacy”).

V

***All About H. Hatterr*— Publication and Impact**

The first edition of *All About H. Hatterr* by Aldor in 1948 was acclaimed by Edmund Wilson and Forster and expedited by T. S. Eliot who readily acknowledged, “In all my experience, I have not met with anything quite like it” (A Biographical Note). An instantaneous sensation, it was rapidly reissued by the Saturn Press in 1950 (UK) followed by a revised edition for the American readers in 1951 by Farrar, Straus & Young. Quite dramatically, by the end of 1951, the previously enthusiastic West relegated Hatterr to “just a little savoury from the colonies” forcing it out of print only to reincarnate it as “a modern classic” with Anthony Burgess’s introductory endorsement in 1970. It sank again into obscurity till Salman Rushdie, after receiving the 1981 Booker prize for *Midnight's Children* finally, though breezily, acknowledged Desani’s debt and brought Hatterr back under the spotlight. The Penguin (India) 1998 reprint 1 is said to have been prompted by Rushdie’s condescending, offhand

¹All citations from G. V. Desani, *All About H. Hatterr*, are from this Penguin(India) rpt., 1998.

understatement regarding the influence of Desani, “My own writing, too, *learned a trick or two* from him” (emphasis mine) in his introductory piece in the New Yorker’s 1997 retrospective on Indian fiction published by Vintage. In fact, Rushdie borrows the title for this article (without acknowledging) from Rehan Ansari’s stage adaptation of *Hatterr* for Modest Productions – *Damme, This Is the Oriental Scene for You!* It was performed throughout February 2000 at Toronto’s Theatre PasseMuraille. London’s Ridiculusmus Theatre produced another adaptation in 1996 and 1997 (<http://www.desani.org/talking-points>).

To return to Rushdie, he often uses compound words where a native calque is combined with an English word to *masquerade* as Indian English neologism. Actual Indian English compounds combine a native calque with an English word to signify a third referent (with specifically Indian characteristics), eg. ‘*lathi-charge*’. Both Rushdie’s and Desani’s compound words merely *stage* this effect, eg. ‘*dia-lamp*’, ‘*khansamah-cook*’ where the native calque is rendered superfluous (Khair).

Hatterr’s pendulous swing from instant recognition to total obscurity and resurgence is paralleled by the extreme responses it drew from several quarters. Promptly banned in Ireland on its appearance and drawing the ire of George Orwell on its ‘untimely appearance’ – “This is no time to play the fool single-mindedly!” – it is the only book to be named Book of the Year on re-publication in 1970 (*News from the Republic of Letters*). It has been variously labelled as “a capacious hold-all of a book” (Burgess), “a word-bending novel” (*Hindustan Times Online*), “agestural critique of Indian nationalism” (Eric D. Smith), “a species of modernist experimentation” (Amardeep Singh), “a post-modern...post-colonial...postwallah” (Anonymous), “verbal extravaganzas in the English (more or less) language” (*The Nation*), “first genuine effort to go beyond the Englishness of the English language” (*Rushdie*)(www.mcphersonco.com/authors/gvdesaid.html;<http://www.dooyoo.co.uk/user/319051.html>; <http://www.desani.org/talking-points>). Perhaps the truth about *All AboutH. Hatterr* lies somewhere between the two assertions made in the work itself: the flaunting defiance against the masters – “I write rigmarole English, staining your goodly godly tongue” – and the deceptively naïve plea of spontaneity, “Damme, I am not in the least aesthetic, but the above vernacular came out of me spontaneously, absolutely!” (http://www.believmag.com/issues/200806/?read=review_desani)

VI

The Author-Text-Hatterr Link

The close connection between Desani, his novel and its protagonist seems to get ‘curiouser and curiouser’ as Alice says in Wonderland, presenting before us a case of triple marginalisation. *All AboutH. Hatterr* is penned by an author who does not fit into his family and homeland, and yet, ironically, goes on to become the spokesperson of that very homeland sponsored by none other than the British Ministry of Information. He promptly vanishes out of sight for over a decade after a sensationally successful debut novel which makes Amitav Ghosh hail him as a hero for his self-inflicted “voicelessness” on supposedly realizing the “incommensurability of what he wanted to say with the language he was saying it in” that presumably haunts most Indian writers in English (“Food for Thought”). He next emerges as an

expert on Oriental philosophy imparting his knowledge to Occidental students, and finally, dies in seclusion on foreign shores. In brief, Desani typifies the restless maverick with no nation to call his own. This perpetual peripatetic produces a work that keeps dipping into obscurity after every glorious rebirth, never quite scaling the heights of ‘a universal masterpiece of all time’. The work focuses on a protagonist who is simultaneously a hero and anti-hero of indeterminate origin, neither British nor Indian, never getting things right and always proving to be the proverbial loser. All three – the author, his work and his protagonist – are permanent outcasts who do not belong: their fictional and real narratives crisscross a no man’s land and their ‘selves’ are quintessentially the ‘other’ in whatever zone they occupy.

VII

The Making of ‘Hatterr, the Hero’

H. Hatterr’s self-introduction, “Biologically I am 50-50 of the species” (31) reiterates his originary ambiguity. His antecedents include a European father “Christian-by-faith merchant merman” (seaman) of indeterminate origin, and a mother of equally vague nationality – a “Malay Peninsula-resident lady, steady non-voyaging, non-Christian human (no mermaid)” (32). The British government of India wrests him from the widowed mother and hands him over to the English Missionary Society to “rescue the baptized mite...from any illiterate non-pi heathen influence” (33). The succinct description of the Reverend running the Society – “The sort of loco parentis who’d shower on you a penny and warn you not to squander it on woman, *and* wine, *and* song!” (32; emphasis author’s) – explains the necessity of escape which Hatterr duly executes but not before usurping the stereoscope which he identifies as “my second love after my mother” (32) and launches on the path of itinerant self-education and self-instruction through a myriad of life experiences. It signals the shaping of a heterogeneous hybrid entity forever occluded from society who, oxymoronically, for that very reason, can lay claims to the title of “*Everyman*” (31; emphasis author’s).

Hatterr’s self-reflexive self-construction – H[industaniwalla] “nom de plume” Hatterr– indulges in a naming extravaganza with double ‘a’ ‘t’ and ‘r’s anticipating the extravagantly absurd situations he is implicated in and lending a carnivalesque aura to the narrative (33; emphases mine). Banerrji, his slave and deliverer is not excluded either, with the additional ‘r’ in his name. Both the name and origin of Hatterr are carefully planned to converge with the final nugget of wisdom that the protagonist anti-hero is supposed to have gleaned from life’s experiences, “Life is...contrast” (275).

Hatterr’s quest is for three things – [1] wisdom from the seven sages or “the illustrious grey-beards” of India (33), [2] some easy money and [3] the elusive charms of certain females, including a washerwoman and a lion tamer – in brief, wisdom, capital and carnal knowledge, apparently uneasy bedfellows, which nevertheless, as Benjamin Slade points out, fit ‘hand-glovishly’ (to coin a Hatterrism) with those set down in the ancient Sanskrit *Dharma Shastras* (Law Codes): *Manusmriti* (social philosophy), *Arthashastra* (wealth, material gain and kingship) and *Kama Sutra* (love and pleasure) (Slade). All encounters culminating in the various misfortunes and mortifications of the anti-hero/ hero effect a glorious spoof of both Oriental and Occidental metaphysics (the pursuit of Brahmagyanas well as the epic hero’s quest for the Holy Grail), reducing the novel to a *mock epic*.

Hatterr's plain desire to get by without much ado, Banerrji's lopsided perspective and idolisation of the perpetually blundering Hatterr, the sages or world at large always taking Hatterr for a ride – all signal an attempt at multiple/ contrasting perspective-based character construction with hilarious incongruities between each perspective. It is a unique, almost risqué device of character construction with no stable point of definition replicating Bakhtin's ever-changing state of simultaneous 'becoming' and 'being'. An apt instance may be cited from Chapter II "...Versus the Impresario" where Hatterr's abject failure to seduce Rosie Smythe, ending up as a lion's human meat-plate and his resultant impulse to flee the scene is interpreted by an ecstatic Banerrji as "a death struggle between the inborn goodness in man and the Vienna libido school" wherein Hatterr has roundly "shamed the devil" and emerged as a "true spiritual devil-may-care" (96)!

The Hatterr-Banerrji relationship also debunks both the colonial hierarchy of races and the notion of the white man's burden, while simultaneously and apparently upholding it. Banerrji, the *always-inevitable* rescuer of the *equally-always-down-in-the-dumps* Hatterr economically, legally, socially and ego wise, remains forever the supplicant native, gratified at getting any chance to *assist* such a great being!² An uproarious and calculated comic invention, the Anglicized Indian Banerrji is a perfect foil to the Indianized Hatterr; Banerrji's semi-apologetic formal English can still be heard in the bureaucratic corridors of India. Their exchanges, frequently at cross purposes highlight the fact that all ridiculousness, in the end, is relative and that it could provide a fresh perspective on the mutual interdependence of the coloniser and the colonized (Mahajan).

Nomenclature is a crucial signifier of the work's seriocomic ambience: a newspaper owner who employs Hatterr is called Chari-Charier (Chapter I); a tear-prone neophyte, Baw Saw and a covetous crook masquerading as the guru, Always-Happy XX, appear in Chapter III; a malaria infected hallucinating sect-leader AnandaGiriGiri flourishes in Chapter IV; the plain advocate Y. Beliram reinvents himself as 504 SrimanVairagi, Paribrajaka, Vanaprasthi, Acharya YatiRambeli(gigantic belly?)³ while defending Hatterr – the list is exhaustive. Imposture and masquerading are, more often than not, the crux of the metamorphoses in the text. Thus impurity, exclusion, reversal, topsyturvydom are unabashedly celebrated with least regard for established boundaries in *All About H. Hatterr*. It becomes in effect, the deconstruction/ demolition of all that is regarded as serious and significant in life.

Several critics view Desani's handiwork as a critique of 'modernism' but in my view his protagonist is an experimental combination of [a] the de-centred postcolonial self, one that is

² Such role reversals, occasioned by the colonial relationship between the Indian and the British were not rare, as instanced by *pundit* Sarman Trivedi's panegyric to his pupil, the famous Orientalist Sir William Jones, whom he taught Sanskrit, "To you there are many like me, but to me there is none like you, & you are like yourself – there are groves of night flowers, yet the N. F. [night flower] sees only the moon" (Trivedi 25, n. 1).

³ In both the Hindi and Bengali language, 'yati' and 'ram' carry the sense of 'huge' or 'extreme' depending on the context and 'beli' is a deliberate mis-spelling of 'belly'.

both inextricably tied to the historical and geographical location while yearning to be free of the constructions of the imperial power and wary of the replacements; and [b] the fragmentary postmodern self, usually perceived as a 'modern' being that searches for unity. The resultant *inter-actionist* self at once creates many selves and many worlds, but rejects the totalizing claims of each, thus bracketing postmodernism and postcolonialism as contesting signifiers for the same signified.

VIII

Generic Affiliation and the Meta-Fiction of Publication

The self-reflexivity noted in the construction of the novel's characters extends to the generic labelling of the work as well, echoing the maxim of expediency and rearguard action that Hatterr is forced to adopt after every encounter:

Indian middle-man (to Author): Sir, if you do not identify your composition a novel, how then do we itemise it? Sir, the rank and file is entitled to know.

Author (to Indian middle-man): Sir, I identify it a gesture. Sir, the rank and file is entitled to know.

Indian middle-man (to Author): Sir, there is no immediate demand for gestures. There is immediate demand for novels. Sir, we are literary agents, not free agents.

Author (to Indian middle-man): Sir, I identify it a novel. Sir, itemise it accordingly.
(“Warning!” [12])

The name game involved in Desani's initial labelling of his work as a “gesture” and its final baptism as a “novel” makes it a *novel by default* or more accurately, a *novel gesture*. If Desani's language, with its bizarre compounds and horseplay with words is any indicator, he perhaps intends the reader to come up with this final nomenclature that challenges all existing modes of categorisation. There is a definite method in madness at work since the process of generic identification underscores instability and is more a matter of survival rather than an adherence to a pre-determined format which duplicates the protagonist's impromptu existence. This ‘itemisation’ as Desani so ingeniously defines it, occurs after a hilarious account of its labour throes – typists refusing to type such “nonsense” highly inappropriate for young women typists and clergymen (2), the only self-typed copy of the manuscript doing the rounds of various publishers and being mutilated by umpteen copy readers who indignantly correct the spelling and sentence construction (3-4), enraged publishers demanding to know the ABC of the book(4-5), with sundry psychiatrists, counsellors, grocers, soldiers, accountants throwing in their opinion for good measure (5-7).

The account of the work's publication is actually the tale of its repeated rejection in keeping with the carnivalesque topsyturvydom. Further, Desani refrains from narrating how the book actually gets published (apart from the succinct epigraph, “Warning!”) thus making its *birth account* as indeterminate and fictional as the main narrative and its protagonist. At the conclusion of the tale, or rather, the fictitious account of the *emergence* of the *novel-gesture*, which misdirects the reader completely, comes the *denial/ death of the author* in the same vein – Desani disclaims all authorial responsibility with the statement, “What follows is wholly H. Hatterr, his work, do believe: and God bless the Duke of Argyll!” (9). Placing Hatterr beside Don Quixote as the inhabitant of a self-authored text, Desani signs out with the ambiguous, almost oxymoronic declaration – “I've told the truth: or, my major Fault! have I!” (9) –

challenging the reader to accept the veracity of his statement and in the process to redefine the concept of veracity itself. Paradox thus becomes the central paradigm for the work, its genesis, the author and the protagonist, and permeates the linguistic texture as well.

IX

Structure

The subterranean method in madness, mentioned earlier, becomes more pronounced as we encounter the *making* of fiction. Despite his numerous disclaimers, Desani's *novel-gesture* (as I shall persist in calling it) has a rigorous structure: the two epigraphs labelled "Warning!", and the production account followed by a "Mutual Introduction" of the inscribed author (Hatterr), serve as a kind of combined prologue for the seven chapters recounting Hatterr's encounter with the seven sages. The rear is brought up by an epilogue labelled "An Afterthought" supposedly penned by another fictional character in the work, a lawyer who, as mentioned previously, prefixes the pompous title of "504 SrimanVairagi, Paribrajaka, Vanaprasthi, Acharya" to his more simple but nevertheless comic name "YatiRambeli" (giganticbelly) to suit the lofty task of providing a worthy defence for the hapless Hatterr. Apart from undermining the very defence it intends to uphold, the 'naming ceremony' is a dig at the aristocrats' and god-men's tendency to legitimise and iterate their political/ religious status by claiming a long line of descent from royal/ holy forbears.

Seven chapters form the mainstay of the book where Hatterr, seeking lucre, lust and illumination, encounters seven sages across India who take on increasingly presumptuous names as the work progresses – sages of *Calcutta*, *Rangoon* (now resident in India), *Madras*, *Bombay*, "right Honourable sage of *Delhi*," "wholly worshipful of *Mogalsarai-Varanasi*" and "naked Holiness number One, the Sage of *All India* himself" – matching the ludicrousness of the 'life experience' encountered and the lesson learned thereof. Save for one, where Hatterr gains a princely sum of Rs 1000/- (Chapter IV), all the escapades conclude in inevitable disaster with Hatterr, very much the modern prototype of the 'gull' in classical drama, barely escaping by the skin of his teeth.

Each of the seven chapters is given an intriguing and often half-finished title – Chapter I. "The Sage, He Spake...," Chapter II. "...Versus the Impressario," Chapter III. "Archbishop Walrus versus Neophyte the Bitter-One," Chapter IV. "Apropos Supernatural Agent...," Chapter V. "Assault below the Belt," Chapter VI. "...Salute the '*Kismet*'" and, Chapter VII. "Punchum and Another, with Contempt" – that *literalise* the ensuing content. For instance, Chapter V. "Assault below the Belt," is literally an assault on Hatterr's loincloth by a demented Naga sanyasi to relieve Hatterr of his hidden stash of money so as to release him from the clutches of "Evil-Triumphphant" green monster (223)!

This literal title is followed by a supposedly information-at-a-glance kind of "Digest" that perversely mystifies and misleads. Chapter III, for example, is about the young, handsome, "master schemer" fake swami (133) Always-Happy, who partners Hatterr to remove competition and then forces him to flee before sharing the spoils by declaring Hatterr as having performed the "*last sadhana*" (144), i.e., castrated himself to attain eternal celibacy, of which proof would be

publicly demonstrated “the coming morrow” (145). But the “Digest” completely obfuscates the storyline even as it hints at the final outcome:

DIGEST

Oyez! oyez! Assemble, ye fellers! Hear this dreadful charge! A reduction ad absurdum. An agent-on-earth of the Governor of the Hades Himself, versus one Neophyte the Bitter-One. A partnership, a *Quisseperabit*? do, and the consequences thereof. *Questions*: Is youth a desirable age? Why is it easy to sit upon a mountain and not on a needle? Why *Life* prevents a feller from carrying a carrot to a donkey, instead, makes him carry a donkey to a carrot – more or less? (98)

The chapter proper, which follows the “Digest,” comprises three sections:

- “Instruction” – imparted by each sage in each chapter, which has a bearing upon the subsequent narrative.
- “Presumption” – a worldview or premise adhered to by Hatter as in Chapter VI titled “...Salute the ‘*Kismet*’”:
‘*Kismet*’, *i.e.*, fate – if at all anything, and as potent as suspected for centuries – is a dam’ baffling thing!
It defies a feller’s rational: his entire conception as to his soma, pneuma and psyche! (225-26; emphasis author’s)
- “Life-Encounter” – an *episode-debacle* (to coin another Hatterism) in Hatter’s life where he inevitably falls into questionable company; gets thoroughly hoodwinked; expresses his bewilderment in a hail of exclamations; flagrantly and disastrously flouts the advice he has sought from the sage (mahaajan) and reaches his own conclusion that that harks back upon the “Presumption”.

For example, the surmise about “Antithesis” cited below (Chapter I, 61), is actually the illustration of the “Presumption” with which the chapter begins:

PRESUMPTION: ‘An international school of thought (minus a headmaster-elect) is antithesis.

‘Antithesis’ is my parlance for the fellers who always oppose. They hate mankind.

They maintain that human nature is rotten to the core!

I am often tempted to agree with the school, and join the classes of hate.

(41; emphasis author’s)

The closed circularity of the novel with its prologue, epilogue and the main body of seven chapters in between, parallels the closed circularity of each chapter, giving an impression of concentric circles that flow and merge into one another. This cyclical narrative pattern, its symmetric rigour, makes one wonder whether Desani wants to illustrate the containment of carnivalesque hedonism within absolute boundaries as in the actual confinement of carnival space in the fairground or whether the spilling over and disintegration of boundaries is a “gestural critique of Indian nationalism’s practice of cultural compartmentalization... where the material and spiritual spheres constructed by Indian nationalist discourse clash and expose one another’s *constructedness* in highly illuminating and comic ways” (Smith; emphasis author’s)

X

Style

The ‘seven cities-seven sages’ syndrome draws our attention to the numerological significance of the number ‘7’ in all aspects of life across all religions and cultures. The Biblical Book of Genesis mentions seven days of creation, the number of *ayats* in *surat al-Fatiha* are seven, Hindu marriage is synonymous with ‘*saatpaakebandha*’ and all three religions – Christian, Islam, Hindu – envisage seven heavens. Music has seven basic notes, Ingmar Bergman’s famous film is titled *SeventhSeal*, James Bond is Agent 007, and the Potter series virtually revels in foregrounding the number – Harry Potter is born in July, the seventh month of the year; Hogwarts offers sevenyears’ of schooling, each Quidditch team has seven players while Voldemort’s seven horcruxes can prove apocalyptic. The list could be infinite.

Given Desani’s in-depth knowledge of several religions, scriptures, Oriental and Occidental philosophy, his choice of seven chapters and seven sages cannot be dismissed as mere coincidence. It brings to the fore a niggling question regarding the ambivalent nature of Desani’s *sauthorial intent* – is he challenging and/ or debunking all knowledge and belief systems that sustain human civilisation, thereby predicting a holocaustic future for mankind or is “the great comedy of intellectual blunders, a subtle defence of Indian metaphysics”(Slade) through the strategy of paradoxical reversal? The doubt deepens when we consider some of the major stylistic features of the text.

Apart from parody, farce, bathos and antithesis that rule the roost, Desani regales the reader with bizarre, unexpected summation of events, arriving at ‘life-lessons’ that turn all conventional logic upside down and yet manage to encapsulate the essence of experience. For example, in Chapter I, Hatterr’s encounter with the First Sage (of Calcutta) that culminates in him being divested of his money, clothes, and job and where the sage is revealed as a dealer of second-hand clothes cleverly extracted from his devotee-visitors, Hatterr arrives at the conclusion that mankind might be categorized as belonging to two groups, “the Hitters (fellers who hit others without scruple or reserve)” like the Sage of Calcutta and, the “two sorts of contrasting ruddy crabs” – those that turn Hitters after their first experience of being hit, and the second sort that “*bear...up*” and seek compensation elsewhere. Hatterrrealises that he belongs to the latter, that is, the basest category of “ruddy crabs” when he feels an inexplicable urge to bash up a total stranger – “an intellectual sahib feller” walking along the street:

‘For no dam’ reason, and *without malice*, I wanted to assault him, and to act in the retributive.

Which observation sums up the *antithesis* school: it is, above all, *retributive! compensatory!*

This desire for retributing, though without malice, satisfies the fellers who have had a mean deal from life. (60-61; emphasis author’s)

The novelty of language (coinage of words like “retributing”, excess of italics, and unconventional use of exclamation marks) notwithstanding, we can perfectly understand and empathise with Hatterr’s desire for the “*retributive! compensatory!*” that assails many of us in similar situations. The half dozen encounters that follow in subsequent chapters, throw up similar nuggets of experience-acquired wisdom.

The two major figures of speech that Desani indulges in are oxymoron and litotes – figures that accentuate contrast and indeterminacy. While oxymoron entails a more or less straightforward juxtaposition of two seemingly contradictory words for effect (Chakrabarti 166-67), Desani indulges in what can best be termed an *extended* or *expanded* oxymoron where incompatible ideas and contexts, rather than words or phrases are juxtaposed, leading to hilarious yet illuminating insights but in the process also introducing confusing contraries as exemplified below where oxymoron lays bare, the essence of religion as a profitable enterprise:

The *divine wisdom business ... is as good a market as any* if one wanted to operate!

Like any other business it is a battle-ground. Thereon, an eternal unto-death struggle is being waged between mugs, suckers, and the opposite smart-sort. You can work your climaxes, and spectacular actions, in *religious business*, as in any the Burgler [*sic*] versus the Burgled class-war of the world.

Moreover, out East, the holy man ramp is cosy for the craft-ful: due, no doubt, to the superstitiously devout tendencies of the population. (122; emphasis mine)

Litotes, as Elizabeth McCutcheon argues with reference to Thomas More's *Utopia*, are deployed to "deny the contrary" and make a positive assertion, and hinges upon four sorts of opposites, "contraries, relatives, privatives, and contradictories" but often turn ambiguous due to the presence of implied mediaries between the two opposite extremes, for e.g., denying that something is black does not automatically label it as white although black/ white is the conventional opposite pair. Ambiguity is also heightened by the "psychological peculiarity of negating a negation," for instance "not uncommon" is considered weaker than "common" by Otto Jespersen because of the double "detour through two mutually destroying negatives" – "not" and "un" (McCutcheon 263-74). Desani's litotes range from the quirky but comprehensible "not indigo blood" (68) and "non-Christianity professing countries" (153) to the more exotic "nil desperandum", i.e., optimistic (184), with various degrees of "denying the contrary" that spreads an aura of ambivalence and ambiguity across the text.

XI

Language

The most consistent source of ambiguity and hilarity however, is the language deployed in this *novel gesture*. The incessant heteroglossia and plurality of voices invoke the Bakhtinian notion of *dialogic exchange* that privileges "neither a live-and-let-live relativism nor a settle-it-once-and-for-all authoritarianism but a strenuous and open-ended dialogism" that allows all voices to "talk...to themselves and to one another, discovering their affinities without resting in them and clarifying their differences without resolving them" (Don Bialostosky, qtd. in Chakrabarti 67-68).

Desani plays havoc with English grammar, syntax and coinage, which is reminiscent of Caliban's use of received language to hit back at his master. Gita Hariharan succinctly labels Desani's language as an "eclectic, nourishing, do-it-yourself subcontinental stew": a view made more explicit by Salman Rushdie's epithet of "decolonizing pen" whose "dazzling, puzzling, leaping prose" taught Rushdie, among other things, how to "dislocate" the English language and "the importance of punctuating badly in order to allow different kinds of speech rhythms or different kinds of linguistic rhythms" (<http://www.desani.org/talking-points>). However,

Desani's decolonizing agenda advances beyond words and punctuation to challenge the pedagogic imposition of Western systems of culture and knowledge with hysteric, inappropriate mishmash of quotes and allusions from Shakespeare to Freud; The Bible to Darwin. A single instance of an agitated Banerji's recourse to the *entire Shakespeare canon* to urge Hatterr to defend himself against legal summons, will suffice: "The Bard has said, Who steals my purse, steals trash! Nevertheless, Mr H. Hatterr, ahead of us is Double, double, toil and trouble; fire burn and cauldron bubble! I am not a sob-sister, but, excuse me, the situation reminds me of *Hamlet*. To be! But firstly, let us be calm, honest Iago..." (112).

Desani's "irreverent ear for the Anglo-Saxon tongue" reaches beyond colonial resistance to prove a "linguistic groundbreaker" ("Book Review"), by "bending orthography, stretching syntax, mixing in shards of Hindi, Hungarian, Spanish, Italian, Japanese, German and a goodly dose of balderdash, whilst tossing in references to Whitman, Shakespeare, Socrates, Freud and appeals to Kama and Laxmi as well as to Allah and Christ" (Ehrenreich). The hedonistic hybridity of usage and expression sampled towards the close of Chapter V will provide an inkling,

To hell with Reason! To hell with judging!

After the evidence of human cussedness as provided by the Mysore plaintiff, and the blind ambition of man as symbolized by the kid Always-Happy, I have no opinions, I am beaten, and I just accept all this phenomena, this diamond-cut-diamond game, this human horse-play, all this topsy-turvisim, as *Life*, as *contrast*.

As to *Truth*, the great generalisation is, '*Dam*' mysterious! *Mum*'s the word! As to *Life*, the locus classic *'contrast*'! (154; emphasis author's)

In his "Introduction" to the 1970 edition of *All About H. Hatterr*, Antony Burgess effects an unusual association of ideas when he uses the French word "*meteque*" (originally a pejorative term to designate an outsider, especially from the Mediterranean, living in France whose physical appearance and general demeanour are considered unpleasant), to refer to Poles and Irishmen (presumably Conrad and Joyce) who in conjunction with Desani "have done more for English in the 20th century (...they have shown what the language is capable of, or demonstrated what English is really like) than any of the pure-blooded men of letters who stick to the finer rules" (qtd. in Slade). Such is their impact that Burgess is forced to resort to the process of *designification*, reinvesting a racist, xenophobic term with a positive connotation that celebrates the 'gloriously impure', the constant novelty of inappropriate usage that could only have been effected by outsiders and not native English speakers.

To conclude, in the larger context of English Literature as a whole (I consciously reject the category 'Indian Writing in English' for reasons stated at the beginning of this article), Desani's *Hatterr* is symptomatic of the "effect of imperialism and incipient decolonization on the development of the British novel" in the first half of the twentieth century, where "discourses of colonialism intersect with the familiar categories of race, class, and gender" and brings to the forefront a whole range of questions regarding the "relationship of empire and aesthetics" (<http://www.personal.utulsa.edu/~william-kupinse/ENGL7453.htm>). Some of the crucial issues that need to be addressed are: to what extent do "colonial texts productively challenge received linguistic and generic forms" and whether "writers from colonial spaces [are]

obligated to take up the mantle of de-colonization” and what is the resultant impact on Indian and English literature as a whole (<http://www.personal.utulsa.edu/~william-kupinse/ENGL7453.htm>). Desani’s *novel gesture* attempts an answer in his signature style – chaotic, befuddling, antithetical – by producing a manifesto of subversion:

The trump card of us Balaamite fellers is the mumbo-jumbo talk: the priestcraft obscurantism and subtlety: (...*Wherefore, pious brethren, by confessing I lie, yoiks! I tell the truth*, sort of topholy trumpeting-it, by the Pharisee G. V. Desani: see the feller’s tract *All About...*, publisher, the same publishing company): a language deliberately designed to mystify the majority, tempt ’em to start guessing, and interpreting our real drift, and allegory, what the hell we mean: pursue our meaning on the *sthula* (gross), the *sukshama* (subtle) and *para* (supreme) plains, and levels, and *still* miss the issue and dash their heads against the crazy-paved rock of confusion. (120; emphasis author’s)

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