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Bildungsroman of an Eccentric *Hindustanwalla*: Revisiting Peculiarities of All about H.

Hatter by G V Desani

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Abstract:

End of second world war brought in some new changes in Indian English fiction. Most of the writers were touched by the agony of wars that affected western world as well as Indian subcontinent; their inclination towards portraying violence, bloodshed, social issues, major event like Partition of India. Writers like Dr Mulk Raj Anand had a sharp-edged axe to grind on all the social evils of the society in his peculiar coarse, blunt satire but at the same time, there was R K Narayan who portrayed most common issues of very common people (residing strictly in Malgudi). When and if he used satire, they were always carried a mild tone. Somewhere in between, or beyond them sits All about H. Hatter, the only novel written by Desani. Present paper aims at revisiting the peculiarities—concerning its theme, characterization and language—of this monumental work, sadly forgotten by common readers.

Keywords: Indian English, Novel, Bildungsroman, Humour

G V Desani, a teacher by profession who taught at prestigious institutes around the globe was a poet and short-story writer who blessed the world of fiction with his only novel *All about H. Hatterr*. It is, in lay man's term a comic novel filled with fantastic farce and tough usage of language. This is a complex novel which combines a variety of themes - East West encounter, search of identity, exploration of reality in course of life and figurative illustration of the sensibility that is Indian at core but layered by westernization. The sensibility and the non-sense stay together in this novel. There is fine balance of humour and irony, condescending insight and absolute foolery, unreal and real, comedy and tragedy, despair and anti-climax are coexisted just finely within the text. This novel is considered as a classic of its own kind on account of the strangeness of its theme and technique. It defies any critical classification. This is because of the hero's novel experiences which cannot be expressed in conventional form of writing. It may irritate the critics who are very particular about linguistic purity and thematic coherence. For this reason, it demands a new type of critical discipline from the readers. It follows the stream of consciousness technique and its language is a peculiar blend of unusual English. The theme of this novel is really puzzling and equally interesting for a sympathetic reader. That is why a great critic like T. S. Eliot said,

"In all my experience I have not met with anything like it. It is amazing that anyone would be able to sustain a piece of work in this style and tempo at such length." (Smith 1)

A Pure Bildungsroman: Eccentric Journey of an Unconventional Character:

This novel can be purely defined as bildungsroman because it offers us a picture of the hero's growth of consciousness, hence it is an expedition and scuffle, schooling outside the campus, the campus of life. Mr. Hatterr, the hero, is born of a European father and a Malayan mother. He is adapted by an English Missionary Society. This is how he becomes a *Sahib*, an aristocratic person amongst Indian Society and remains in the *sahib* society till the age of fourteen. When his boyhood comes to an end, he naturally acquires a new awareness of the world. He begins to discover his likes and dislikes and becomes conscious of his identity as a man in the world. While staying in the English Mission, he discovers that his nature is not suited to such a life of religion. He grows extremely fed up with the puritanical instructions. Hence, one day, Hatterr, like the bohemian painter of *Fra Lippo Lippi* in Browning steals

three books: an English Dictionary, a Latin self-taught and a French Self-taught of the Rev. the Head and runs away from the Mission.

To start a new life, he gives himself a new name, HindustaniwallaHatterr. Now he is free from the tyrannical clutches of religion. He decides to plunge into life and undergo various experiences and derive his own philosophy of life out of the knowledge acquired through his senses. He seems to be damn I starvation. He is not satisfied with the religious tired of a life of emotional him. He does not like life of mere introspection principles which fail to activate any contemplation. Like Oscar Wilde who hungered for the life of exquisite or any sensations, he also pines for the life of actual and interesting experiences, though they may be sometimes hazardous. Being an extrovert, he wants to pose himself to the naked realities of life and that way, he wants to get knowledge of the essence of life. He eagerly wishes to reach the Ultimate Truth through his personal experiences.

Like Stephen Dedalus and, Leopold Bloom in Joyce's "Ulysses", Hatterr and his friend Banerji move from place to place in search of the Truth of life. Their adventures cover up the whole of India. He meets the sages of in various cities of India and receives instructions and starts thinking about them. He says to himself, "Be suspicious I Meditate on a male dog! Look for the indirect lesson! Reality is not Appearance. He becomes very clear in his mind about different 'presumptions such as 'youth is an ugly. age, evil triumphs. 'Kismet or fate is a dam battering thing. He escapes from the pursuit of a washerwoman. Then he pursues Rosy of the circus show, and then he has a series of encounters with bogus saints of all kinds; Sadanandji, Master Punchumand others in the meantime, his kismet leads him to marriage which proves to be a very bitter experience. As a result of such knocks and shocks. Hatterr evolves his own philosophy which he reveals to Banerji.

"I say to posterity in Twentieth century life is contrast That is my crux Statement. Life is ups and downs, light and shade, sun and cloud, opposites and opposites! Take anything and you will find the opposite I It is my self-realised conclusion that life, life is contrast! Life is no one way pattern. It is contrasting all the way. And contrasts by law! Not just motley mosaic, not just crazy run and-go-do-as-you-please contrasts, but design in them." (Desani 155)

Thus, Hatterr feels totally lost in this confusion yet there is this loss of ego. Hatterr feels his identity to be a mirage—much like some dead person and yet he feels enormous peace. This

mystic has been posed to various troubles and problems during his journey throughout India and has come to the above conclusion about life. If anybody differs from his ideology, he has a ready answer "All improbable are probable in India." (27)

Thus, the readers who are seasoned with a strait forward story line will definitely feel puzzled going through pages of this novel. It is all about a topsy-turvy ride through life and psyche of H. Hatterr. It contains such a complex way of narration that reader feels perplexed after every chapter, and sometime during the chapter as well. According to Anthony Burgess who wrote the preface of this novel:

“The reader who expects the shapeless mind-wandering regularly associated with an amateur search for Truth, must now be informed that H. Hatterr's story is as carefully, even pedantically, planned as Ulysses. There are seven long sections, each of which begins with H. Hatterr consulting a Sage. That means seven Sages, each from a different Oriental city, each specialising in a different aspect of Living (H. Hatterr's capitalisation is infectious). The student, having learnt some great Generality, then proceeds to an Adventure, in which he attempts to spread the gospel to other aspiring minds. He ends the section in a discussion with his friend Banerji, then, refreshed and more hopeful than ever, he proceeds to the next stage of enlightenment. Some such pattern, as Joyce knew, was essential if the fine flood of language was not to take chaotic control”. (Desani 10)

Agony of H. Hatterr:

Title of this novel suggests that H Hatterr is the most important and significant character in this novel. He is the hero who is in search of self. identity and Ultimate Truth of life. Hatterr the year-old orphan who faces a sense of footlessness and insecurity everywhere. His parents died in childhood. He has been deprived of motherly love. He has no relations. He is lost between the East and the West, he is born of a European father and a Malayan mother. He is adapted by an English Missionary Society He decides to go to the West where he becomes conscious of his mixed heritage When he comes to India. he is rejected by both the races. He is cheated, robbed and exploited by persons of both the races. He is driven out of a white club on the false complaint of washerwoman whose advances he rejects the sage wilderness, a second-hand cloth dealer, makes him nude and performs as dance round the pile of his clothes. Then he works in a circus as a lion tamer. Then he smears his body with ashes and

joins a Sadhu. He becomes a wandering saint. A Naga Sadhu steals his single cloth in which he has concealed his money. Hatterr is an unaccommodated man both in the West and the East because he is a cultural hybrid. He is a tragi-comic character who deserved both our pity and ridicule. He is an explorer of Truth who has learnt from the school of life many sweet and bitter lessons of life. At last he exposes the contrast between appearance and reality.

After he runs away from the English Missionary Society, life appears to him meaningless. He is brooding about suicide, but suddenly he changes his mind and decides to live life however frustrating or dangerous it may be. His strong aim in life is to get experience and attain romance, adventure and success. He goes on to meet different types of people in order to gain knowledge of life through personal experience.

Mockery of Fake Spirituality:

His main concern is with the truth of life, so he meets only those who are traditionally accepted in India to be the guardians of Truth, known as sages he meets seven sages and has different experiences which range from the fantastic to the mock-mystic ones. First, he meets the sage of Calcutta who teaches him a moral that man should always be suspicious. Hatterr has the same such experience. A sixty years old washer-woman pursues him. He dismisses her with a hurried kiss. But she follows him to his club and gets him dismissed through a false complaint. He decides to commit suicide. But his friend, Banerji advises him to live along and he does so. Desani puts some deep satirical words in H. Hatterr's mouth criticizing mock-spirituality:

Out in the Orient, if you wish to become an abbot, a curate feller, a deacon, a general soul-pilot, or even a bishop of a diocese, on the whole, there is no need to invest finance in a varsity education, pass exams, do the daily routine with St. Alban's Clean Shave, or ballyhoo constantly in order to raise lucre for the broken church organ hold antimacassar sales, mock weddings, or organise home-made jam jamborees, garage sales, and junk bazaars. . . . In India, if you decide to go religious, be a semi-Benedictine, a sacred chicken, belong to the Cloth, no need to hullabaloo at all. You simply cast-off clothing. You wear the minimum loin-cloth, walk freely on the plains of the country of Hindustan, and, if you are a genuine feller at all, you spend your life comforting, instructing, and teaching the populace. That's the bush theologica-indica in a nut-shell for you. (117-18)

Then he is deeply shocked with surprise when he comes to know that his club member, Mr. Hakon flirts with his wife.

In his next experience as a magazine reporter, he goes to collect somedate about a man called the sage of wilderness. He shares meal with the sage. Then the sage asks him to undress himself completely and dance around his clothes, he does so and returns to his office in a semi-naked fashion. He loses his job on account of his inability to produce the necessary report. He goes back to the sage to get back his clothes but fails because the Sage runs the business of second-hand clothes. Here the hero learns that life is a combination of opposites like the weak and the strong, the exploited and the exploiters.

Thirdly, Hatterr meets the Sage of Rangoon, a philosopher. The Sage advises him never to think of a female. But one day he feels strong sexual urge in himself and craves for a feminine company. He has an encounter with Rosie, the wife of Bill Smythe, a lion tamer. She loves him on one condition that he should act as a substitute lion tamer for her husband. He agrees with her, but he is so much afraid of a lion during the circuit show. Here he learns a lesson of amazing courage and self-sacrifice. He also learns that the twentieth century is the Medical Man's century caring only for the body. Basically, he is a man of action, not of meditation.

Then the Sage of Madras teaches him not by instruction but by interrogation. He dislikes Hatterr's blighted ignorance. He finds this Guru too abstract and goes to Sheik Ell who is known for his concrete instruction. He attributes his success in life to his necktie which is a mystic symbol. Hatterr asks for the tie. Sheik becomes angry and asks him to go back to Sage of Madras. He finds himself lost and meets a money-lender in Mysore who mistakes him for a real bard and sends him 'halwa' and Rs. 300/- Hatterr feels happy, but after a few days, he receives a show cause notice in which he is asked to pay double the amount i.e. Rs 600/- and attend the court in Mysore. What a bitter experience of a financial involvement.!

Then he meets a great poseur, Sadanandi, i.e. always happy, the Archbishop Walrus of Bihar, with whom he participates in a great religious ceremony called 'the night of nights'. This ceremony is preceded and followed by walking and swimming naked before the fellow humans. Here Hatterr learns a lesson that life is full of contrasts ups and downs, light and shade.

Hatterr learns the next lesson from the Sage of Delhi who teaches him mystery of life through his own personal life. He tells Hatterr that the Universe is governed by the laws of causes and subcauses one creature feeding on the other and thus victimising the innocent. The same thing happens in Hatterr's life when he meets a Naga youngman, fights with him and goes away!

At last, Hatterr meets the Sage of All-India, Swami Punchum. He is worried about the problem of the joint cunning in the society. The Sage advises him. "Abscond from charlatants and deceivers as thou would from venomous snakes." Hatterr gives an example to the Sage of a shopkeeper who used false weights and cheated the customers. The the shopkeeper had a quarrel with three countrymen in which Hatterr was badly injured. Hel asks the Sage why the Innocent are thus victimised. he gets reply from Punchum that 'man does everything for the sake of his stomach'.

Thus Hatterr's encounters with the seven sages reveal that he has been in search of meaning of life. Sometimes he reminds us of Don Quixote and his friend, Banerji resembles Sancho Panza, Just as Don Quixote is cured of his lillusion at the end of his advi trained also cured of his false notions about life. Being an in the school of life, Hatterr wants the readers to benefit from his own experiences in different walks of life.

"This crafty exploitation of the social order, of the new esteem afforded those inhabitants of the spiritual realm (especially women and holy men) in the emergent national culture, is the key theme in the novel and has two important effects. First, Desani problematizes the easy nationalist distinction between the material and spiritual by demonstrating the ways in which one sphere can be manipulated for gain in (and thus contaminated by) the other, thereby revealing that the two are not always incommensurable and are, in fact, merely mutually sustaining fictions. This recognition has tremendous consequences for Indian nationalism, Theosophy, and for any essentialist episteme. Also, and perhaps more important for my purposes here, Desani makes a statement with regardto subaltern agency itself". (Smith 128)

Narrative Ambiguity in *All about H. Hatterr*:

After WW II, we find radical changes in the whole picture of the Indo-Anglian literature in the matter of these and technique. Desani's *All about H. Hatterr* is a work which combines a variety of themes. It is considered as a classic of its own kind on strangeness of its theme and

technique. It may irritate on account of the critic who are very particular about linguistic purity and thematic Coherence For this reason, it demands a new type of critical discipline from the readers. It follows the stream of consciousness technique and its exaggerated language appears to be un-English and exotic

Incontestably, *All about H. Hatter* is a herculean achievement. Anticipating the reader's eagerness and excitement, Desani explains the ABC of the book in the opening pages. He says, "the choice of words is conditioned by the hero's experience. and that is why the book is not in English as it is normally written or spoken." (16) Secondly, although Desani is the creator of Hatter as Shakespeare is the creator of Hamlet. the book still belongs to Hatter. The writer says, "Though I warrantee and underwrite, the book is his, I remain anonymous", Desani further observes, "the words and constructions are there simply because they are natural to H. Hatter". (16-17) Like James Joyce, here Desani allows his hero to make linguistic experiments on account of his endless hunger for experience.

As a follower of the mystique tradition, Desani stands with James Joyce, Conrad, Dylan Thomas, Faulkner and V. S. Naipol. Hatter's English is a mixture of quotations and misquotations, literary allusions and colloquialisms. proverbs and idioms, curses and vulgarisms and what not! His language reflects his broken personality and his fondness for peculiar English words. Hatter says to his friend, Banerji.

"You Banerji only read that damme writer Shakespeare, the bard this the bard that I had father be a dog, and bay the moon! To hell with kittens, I am hot literary I admit you that. But I tell you, man, I have seen more life than that feller Shakespeare." (95)

His friend, Banerji speaks typical BengaliBabu English. This novel provides the finest example of linguistic humour. Here puns are the chief source of humour.

The Panchtantra, *the Upanishads* and *the Puranashave* contributed to its artistic beauty. This novel is structurally based on the *Panchtantra* which uses the device of chain story throughout. The device of autobiographical narrative is typically Western. *All About H. Hatter* is a synthesis of Eastern and Western narrative techniques. Its place in Indian fictional literature is unique and unparalleled on account of its thematic strangeness and exaggerated language

H. Hatter: A Carrollian or a Quixotic Hero?

The title of this novel is given after the name of H. Hatter because he is the hero and the pivot of the whole action of the novel. All other characters and incidents revolve round his character. His encounters with the seven sages, reveal that he has been in search of meaning of life, like Don Quixote, and in the same way like celebrated protagonist of Cervantes at the end of his adventures Hatter is cured of his false notions about life.

Desani's absurd narrator-hero has adopted the name of Hatter from his English headmaster whose over-sized hat reminds him of the Mad Hatter of Lewis Carroll's Alice. The Carrollian hero's surrealistic fantasy/resembles Hatter's seven adventures. Most of them are encounters with 'gurus' and women. All of them exploit and cheat the helpless Hatter. He lived an innocent life abroad, but in India he is lost in the jungle of disillusionment and deception. There is a touch of Don Quixote in his series of quest after quest. All his quests end in acute discomfort, loss of his trousers, robberies, adventures with lions and lunatics and persecution by wife and mistress. Yet Hatter net a romantic Knight. His ambitions are a curious mixture of the Worldly and the mystical, he is in search of a 'guru', 'Sanyasi', 'Sadhu', 'fakir' who in the ancient tradition of Hindu Wisdom, will offer him guidance to religious truth. At the same time, he is also in search of gold, easy wealth and he is not repelled by the charms of the opposite sex.

His name, HindustaniwalaHattersymbolises his own hopelessness and consequential feeling of seclusion and estrangement. Here 'H' stands for Hindustaniwala and Hatter suggests a 'sahib'. This name was inspired by the 'too-large'for him hat of the Headmaster of Hatter's Missionary School.Desani puts this story in a very peculiar style in following words:

“I assumed the style-name H. Hatterfor the nom de plume 'Hindustaniwala, and 'Hatter', thenom de guerre inspired by Rev. the Head's too-large-for-him-hat),and, by and by (autobiographical I, which see), I wentcompletely Indian to an extent few pure non-Indianbloodsahib feller have done”. (33)

It also suggests the Hatter from 'Alice in Wonderland'. There is a touch of madness in his action, but like Hamlet's madness, there is a method in his madness.

All and all, through this novel G V Desani has shot many sparrows with just one arrow. The impact of novel was so strong that modern masters of Indian English like Arundhati Roy and Salman Rushdie publicly accredited the influence of this work on their writing. If the reader can excel the hazard of this bizarre plot-construction and unconventional combination of various versions of English—the standard, the *babu*, the Sanskrit flavour, the Hindi flavour—it assures not only a terrific ride of laughter but it touches so many issues that had absolute relevance in the era of the author but it still feels contemporary. Most importantly, H. Hatterr's eccentricity has an empathetic effect on readers across the world in general and Indian readers in particular since all human-being hides a H. Hatterr inside them which time and again tries to surface successfully or futilely.

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