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**G.V. Desani's *All About H. Hatterr*: A Mock-*Bildungsroman***

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**Abstract**

G. V Desani makes a new intervention in the history of the *Bildungsroman* by choosing to write his first ever novel as a mock-*Bildungsroman*. *All About H. Hatterr* is an example of the *Bildungsroman* turned upside down, inside out, twisted right and left. It is a parody of all the conventions and structures which are intrinsic to the *Bildungsroman* as a genre. Whereas the traditional *Bildungsroman* is realistic narrative, Desani's mock-*Bildungsroman* presents the growing up of its eponymous narrator with Dickensian satire and Rabelaisian humour in a surrealistic fantasy narrative. Hatterr's quest to attain self-realization and the meaning of life from the seven sages of India is a parody of the generic features of the traditional *Bildungsroman*. Hatterr's grand quest ends hilariously as he not only fails to attain his grandiose goal of self-realization and meaning of life but also loses his wife, vocation and even his clothes. Hatterr's directionless individual existence and his failure to find meaningful accommodation in society mocks the promise of individual development and social acceptance offered by the traditional *Bildungsroman*.

**Keywords:** *Bildungsroman*, Self-Realization, Language, Parody.

G. V. Desani, the author of the novel *All About H. Hatterr*, didn't live a life less fantastic than his fictional counterpart. He had multiple affiliations to different nations just like his novel's protagonist. Born to a Sindhi family in Nairobi, Kenya in 1909 and raised in Pakistan, Desani moved to Britain to earn his livelihood as a BBC commentator in the 1930s and 1940s. Shortly after his publication of his lone novel *All about H. Hatterr* in 1948, he returned to India to work as a correspondent for The Times of India. He immersed himself in Buddhism and Hinduism for over a decade and even spent a year at a Burmese monastery as a guest of the Burma government; and went on to become the president of the World Federation of Buddhists. He also wrote poems, short stories, and essays and published his poetic play *Hali* in 1952 and published a collection of short stories along with his earlier poetic play as *Hali and Short Stories* in 1991. He was invited to the University of Texas to teach Philosophy in

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1968, where he taught for 11 years till his demise in 2000.

Astonished by the novel in the year the novel first appeared, T. S. Eliot said, "In all my experience, I have not met with anything quite like it. It is amazing that anyone should be able to sustain a piece of work in this style and tempo at such length" (Lal 53). Desani out-Joyces Joyce in his virtuosity with English language and in using overtly hybridized form of Indianised English which would usher a new generation of English writers beginning with Rushdie who would not be hesitant of departing from pure English. The novel's language is Hatterr's language which is a cocktail of English, Indian, French and Latin expressions and colloquialisms.

Desani's novel anticipated a new paradigm which became a staple of Indian English Fiction three decades later when writers like Salman Rushdie, Arundhoti Roy, Allan Sealy and others continued Desani's project of polluting "pure" English which he started in *All About H. Hatterr*. Writers like Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy have acknowledged their debt to Desani's language. Rushdie eulogizes Desani's idiom in the following words: "This is the 'babu English,' the semi-literate, half-learned English of the bazaars, transmuted by erudition, highbrow monkeying around, and the impish magic of Desani's unique phrasing and rhythm into an entirely new kind of literary voice"

(Kellman 255). Desani plays with English language with amazing creativity and ease. Torrents of novel expressions, puns, parodies and colloquialisms flood the novel. Anthony Burgess too lauds the novel for its linguistic virtuosity. He writes in the novel's introduction that, "it is the language that makes the book, a sort of creative chaos that grumbles at the restraining banks. . . . It is not pure English: It is like Shakespeare, Joyce, and Kipling, gloriously impure" (10).

Despite the path breaking language, structure, form and content, the novel received far less critical attention than it should. However, after New York Review of Books released it again in 2007, it has attracted some critical attention.

Desani's novel which was published just a year after India's anti-colonial movement and emergence as an Independent nation has been astonishingly apolitical. But political resistance can take subtler forms and the form of linguistic resistance deployed by Desani and bequeathed to successive writers has been the chief means of colonial resistance employed by Indian English writers after Desani. The novel is a milestone in the colonial resistance of Indian writers against the tyranny of British idiom, expressions, colloquialisms and metaphors. Desani's novel is a milestone in Indian English fiction as it ushered an era of writing in

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English which refused to obey the textbook British idiom and syntax.

Like the classical *Bildungsroman*, the plot of Desani's novel revolves around its protagonist H. Hatterr on his journey to achieve enlightenment. In his quest for wisdom and enlightenment, Hatterr visits seven sages who turn out to be impostors and deadlier than the seven sins. Each of its seven chapters begins with a section named "Digest" which contains the central questions which are answered in later sections. The next section is named "Instruction" which contains the dialogues between Hatterr and a number of sages all over India. The next section is named "Life Encounter" in which he gets the answers to his vexing questions. Apart from the seven chapters, the novel has three prefaces and an exhaustive appendix.

The very title of *All About H. Hatterr* indicates a mocking inversion of the *Bildungsroman* tradition. Whereas the titles of the traditional *Bildungsroman* novels such as Goethe's *WilhemMiester's Apprenticeship*, Wieland's *The History of Agathon*, Dicken's *David Copperfield*, Brontë's *Jane Eyre* sound solemn, realistic and prefigure a realistic portrait of its eponymous protagonist's life. The title of Desani's novel sounds ludicrous and alludes to a character in Lewis Caroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, the "Mad Hatter", who goes mad towards the end of

Caroll's novel. Hatterr himself is apprehensive about his mental condition as he suffered a head-injury in his childhood and was warned that he might develop mental disorder.

Hatterr's name is outlandish and hilarious for a hero of a *Bildungsroman*. In his name H. Hatterr, H stands for *Hindustaaniwalla*, the non-de-plume and *Hatterr* the non-de-guerre, which is a mockery of his hybrid ancestry and existence. His first name Hindustaniwalla also reflects his desire to be identified as an Indian without having any Indian blood coursing through his veins. His second name Hatterr indicates his "too large-for-him-hat" (33) which he wore and it indicated his "sola-topi," the cap worn by the British in India.

Hatterr is the offspring of a miscegenated union between a Christian European merchant and a non-Christian Malayan woman from Penang. He is of mixed-descent, a Eurasian, partly European from his father's side, and partly Asian by his mother's side, making him "biologically, fifty-fifty of the species":

One of my parents was a European, Christian-by-faith, merchant merman (seaman). From which part of the Continent? Wish I could tell you. The other was an Oriental, a Malay

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Peninsula-resident lady, a steady non-voyaging, non-Christian human (no mermaid). From which part of the Peninsula? Couldn't tell you either. (31)

Hatter's adventures and misadventures on his journey to probe into the mysteries of self and find enlightenment through encounters with sages and women in the seven chapters of the novel reveal his hybrid existence, who is part European and part Asian, part sensual and part spiritual, and part rogue and part mystic. Hatter is cursed by his mixed-ancestry and his hybrid colonial situation to live his life and personality in parts, and is never able to attain his desired holistic existence.

Hatter becomes an orphan when his father dies due to chronic malaria and pneumonia and her mother disappears after losing a litigation for possession of Hatter. A Scottish parishioner, a trader of jute, who adopted Hatter and brought him to India. Hatter was brought up till age 14 in an orphanage of the English Missionary Society.

Like the hero of the classical *Bildungsroman*, Hatter, has an overpowering desire for freedom and education. When he realises that that an evangelical life is an anathema to his temperament, he runs away from the

orphanage stealing the mission funds and three books—an English dictionary, a Latin primer and a French primer. An autodidact Hatter gains a formidable command over English, Latin and French from these three stolen books. In the words of Hatter, "I decided to chuck the school, get into the open spaces of India ... and win my bread and curry all on my own" (32).

Throughout his life, Hatter expresses a strong self-reflexive assertion of his love for freedom and desire to move freely and interpret his experiences in his own way. Apropos the hero of the classical *Bildungsroman* who prefers to be "educated" in the school of life and the world rather than the institutions of formal education system, Hatter leaves the orphanage school for the "open spaces of India" (32) to search for his self and wisdom and enlightenment. He tells us that whatever he knows he had "learnt from the school of Life; all the lessons, the sweet, the bitter, and the middling messy" (33). Hatter's educators are five impostor sages, three amorous women and a deceiving south Indian loan shark. Ironically, it is seen that he learns little from his educational encounters he has with his educators.

The protagonists of the traditional *Bildungsroman* go out into the world and experience both triumphs and failures and come to a better understanding of self and a

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positive view of the world. For Hatterr, there are only failures, and repetitive failures. Hatterr embarks upon a grand quest to probe the mysteries of life and find enlightenment by visiting seven impostor sages from Calcutta, Rangoon, Madras, Bombay, Delhi, Moghalsarai-Varanasi and the last of them, "the Sage from All-India."

In the first chapter, Hatterr meets The Sage of Calcutta also known as the Sage of Bitterness in order to write a report about his secret austerities as a sub-urban reporter of a newspaper *Bazaar*. The simpleton Hatterr is impressed with the sage's simplicity in matters of clothing food and his meditative posture. However, he soon realises that both the sage and his disciples were fake. He turns out to be a second-hand clothes seller, who dupes him to forsake his clothes and his belongings and dismisses him away only with a messy towel imprinted with "G.I.P. Railway." Hatterr not only loses his clothes and belongings, but also his job as a reporter of *Bazaar*. Hatterr realizes that the sage and his disciple are two brothers from Lucknow who were second hand clothes and material dealers. They are still in the business only that they have changed their modus operandi. They collect the clothes of the devotees in the name of charity and use them in their business.

In the second chapter, Hatterr meets the Sage of Rangoon, who is now a resident

of India. The sage preaches that the desire for woman is the root of all woes and therefore, the carnal desire in man should be extinguished and eliminated. Hatterr is unable to follow the sage's advice and refuses to leave his wife and longs for conjugal love. Ironically, Bannerjee, Hatterr's anglophilic friend, informs that his wife Rialto has left her and has taken an Anglo-Indian lover.

The Sage of Madras appears in the third chapter who was a stock exchange business in his mundane life. Due to his elevation in his business, he had a conflict with his father and had to be separated from his family for four years. After acquiring a lot of wealth, he toured around the world and tasted all kinds of meat, including beef. In Hinduism, crossing the seas and eating beef is considered sin. The sage charges money from his disciples and dispels them away when they cannot afford to pay.

In the "Life Encounter" section of chapter three, Hatterr encounters Sadanand XX, i.e., "Always Happy XX." The unique thing about this encounter is that the sage is younger to Hatterr by thirty years. Hatterr addresses him as a boy and the sage addresses Hatterr as uncle. Hatterr comes to know that the sage was a private lottery agent in his materialistic life and enters into an agreement with him to cooperate as a disciple under his pseudonym the "Bitter One" and agrees to share the profit in the

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ratio of sixty and forth between them. The sage uses Hatterr to get rid of another competitor sage named Hiramanek Mukti. After accomplishing his motive, the sage gets rid of him without giving him his promised forty percent share of profits from lottery commission.

In the fifth chapter, Hatterr meets the Sage of Bombay otherwise known as Master Ananda Giri-Giri who becomes infatuated with Hatterr and attempts to have physical and spiritual union with him and also attempts to murder Hatterr in a fit of delirium. When Hatterr tries to escape, the sage's disciples accuse him of being possessed by a ghost and try to burn him at stake.

In the fifth chapter, Hatterr runs into the Sage of Delhi and his disciple. The Sage of Delhi preaches Hatterr that the reality of the world is a mystery. In the section "Life Encounter" of this chapter, Hatterr meets a sage of the "Order of Nagas" or Naga Sadhu. Pretending to be concerned about Hatterr, the sage finds out that Hatterr is hiding his money in his loin-cloth. The sage, then steals his money and disrobes him in a mock wrestling duel.

The last sage Hatterr encounters is PanditPunchum, a fat and naked ascetic, whose satsangHatterr attends. He brainwashes him to donate his month's salary as charity. Hatterr realizes that the satsangs were a trick by which Punchum and his men cheated people.

The hero of traditional *Bildungsroman* has a meaningful full relationship with men and women who contribute to his growth and maturity. In Desani's mock-*Bildungsroman*, Hatterr is not only deceived, gulled and duped by seven sages, he is also manipulated, betrayed and deceived by the women he encounters. The first is a lascivious washerwoman "nearer sixty than fifty whom Hatterr owes money, and when she makes sexual advances towards Hatterr, he tries to satisfy her with "a sundry kiss or two" (44). The lust of the washerwoman was not be satisfied with kisses of Hatterr, so when she makes further sexual advances, Hatterr reprimands her, which the washerwoman avenges by making a scene at his club which gets him expelled from the club.

The second encounter of Hatterr is with Mrs. Rosie Smyth, the wife of a circus-owner. While in Hatterr's encounter with the washerwoman it was the woman who made advances towards Hatterr, in the present encounter, it is Hatterr who is attracted towards Mrs.Smyths and makes advances towards her. Mrs.Smyths exploits Hatterr and forces him to become a lion-tamer and a "human plate" for a lion. Mrs. Smyths lets a lion eat a piece of steak served his bare chest, which frightens him and sends him to a reverie.

Hatterr's wife whom he describes as "Kiss-curl" (64), "perspiring, hip-rolling

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and soundly sleeping wife" (43), "outsize to the core" (64), is her third woman who betrays him. At a gathering where Hatterr was being conferred a title "Ocean of the Musical Art" or Sangita Kala Sagara by a music society, his wife Kiss-curl Rialto appears with her Anglo-Indian lover in her arms and asks to disperse from the spot and threatens to shoot everybody with her six-gauge shotgun foiling Hatterr's ambition of possessing the prestigious title, and making Hatterr run semi-nude in the garden in lashing rain.

Hatterr receives the most eye-opening and jolting realization from a loan-shark in Mysore. During his stay in Mysore where he worked in the wholesale sandal-wood oil business, he encountered an unknown south Indian loan-shark, who deceived him arousing his sympathy by narrating his acute poverty and emotionally blackmails him to borrow an amount on loan on his behalf, which doubles in one month. The south Indian loan shark stops correspondence with Hatterr later and he is prosecuted for repayment of the loan amount. Incapable of repaying the loan amount, Hatterr absconds and turns into a sadhu.

Hatterr's *Bildung* is an absurd life of a dunce who is repeatedly duped, deceived, cheated, betrayed, victimised, intimidated, deprived, dispossessed, stripped naked and cuckolded. Hatterr learns nothing from these repeated instances of victimisations

and almost compulsively running into another trap. It is a parody of the model of the *Bildung* of the classical *Bildungsroman* where the hero learns precious lessons from his good and bad encounters with people in the arena of life. Hatterr's relentless search for self-knowledge and enlightenment is an absurd portrayal of the search of the hero in the traditional *Bildungsroman* for self-realization. Hatterr represents the absurd condition of man and his fruitless search of purpose and meaning of life. The endpoint of *Bildung* of a hero in the traditional *Bildungsroman* is the integration of the individual into his family, society and group. In Desani's novel, Hatterr is expelled from the English club after his encounter with the washerwoman, is cheated and jilted by his wife Rialto, is duped by a loan shark and eventually has to live a life of a recluse.

Hatterr loses his job as a reporter for the sub-urban newspaper Bazaar. At the end of the novel, Hatterr becomes an insolvent and has to leave society due to his insolvency. Hatterr is bereft of any family too. Hatterr loses his father at an early age. The whereabouts of Hatterr's mother are unknown. Rialto, Hatterr's wife, takes an Anglo-Indian lover from the English club, and leaves Hatterr. At the end of Hatterr's journey we find him without family and society.

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One of the minuscule realizations that Hatterr has about life is that life is a contrast:

Dr Albert Einstein, the discoverer of the Theory of Relativity, said to posterity in 1905, 'All motion is relative!' That was his *major*-Statement. He is an educated feller, a medico-philosopher enjoying world fame [...] I am a mere nobody, but I have carried out some research on my own. And I say to posterity, in the Twentieth Century, '*Life is contrast.*' That is my crux-Statement. Damme, look at *Life!* *Life* is ups and downs, light and shade, sun and cloud, opposites and opposites!

*Life* is no one-way pattern. It's *contrasts* 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 'em. There are flowers that bloom in certain seasons: and, *contrast!* *don't* bloom in certain seasons. A hell of a puzzle? Maybe: maybe not.

It strikes a feller as a puzzle.  
(236)

The most fascinating contrasts presented in the novel is that between East and West. Hatterr who is "a mixed Oriental-Occidental *sinfant*," that is part Asian and part European is the best specimen of this contrast. Hatterr like, Tiresias in *The Waste Land*, can see the best and worst of both the worlds. He can see the East and its inanities through western eyes, and the West and its absurdities Eastern eyes. After being deceived again and again by five sages, two women, his wife, and an unknown loan-shark, Hatterr concludes that he is fated to be deceived and he cannot avoid it.

The *Bildungsroman* traditionally opens with the hero moving towards self-realization, self-assurance, self-improvement, self-awareness and social integration. Individual development is integral to the traditional *Bildungsroman*, and the protagonist goes through considerable angst, trials and tribulations. The protagonist learns lessons from these experiences and progresses on his or her path to maturity, gains a proper vocation, a distinct identity, establishes meaningful relationships, and gains social acceptance.

The protagonist of a mock-*Bildungsroman* also goes through such angst, trials and tribulations but doesn't learn anything from his or her experiences. The protagonist of a mock-*Bildungsroman*

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remains stagnant or loses instead of gaining anything from his journey of life, eventually failing to live up to the expectations of his *Bildung*. Such a protagonist fails to change, grow or adapt to his environment and milieu and ends his journey in a failed and bitter *Bildung*.

*All About H. Hatterr* opens with the hero moving towards self-degradation, self-delusion, vagrancy, and self-exile. The traditional *Bildungsroman* shows the immature hero grow into an awareness of the opulence, promise and open-ended possibilities of life, in *All About H. Hatterr* the sense of a positive and satisfactory growth of the hero is abruptly stripped away with his encounters with seven sages, three women and a loan-shark who betray and dupe the hero in his search for self and wisdom.

The hero learns and profits from his encounters with the mentors in a traditional *Bildungsroman*. In Desani's novels, the mentors dupe, deceive and manipulate Hatterr. Instead of progressing, expanding and maturing, the young at the end is hapless, impoverished, isolated, rendered jobless, robbed of his money, stripped of his clothes, exploited by women, betrayed by his wife, duped by conmen and forced into self-exile.

The novel mock's Hatterr's search for self and a viable philosophy of life in

postcolonial India. Hatterr's spiritual quest for wisdom and enlightenment ends in ignorance and delusion. At the end of his journey, Hatterr is left with his questions of life unanswered. Hatter instead of ascending the mountain of self-knowledge, spirals into self-delusion.

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