

**G.V. Desani : The Man and His Works****Dr. Siddhartha Sharma**Associate Professor of English  
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MGCGV, Chitrakoot, Satna (MP)**Abstract**

G.V. Desani, a former professor Emeritus of philosophy at the University of Texas at Austin, was born at Nairobi, Kenya (East Africa), on 8 July 1909. When he was not yet fourteen, he ran away from home. In 1927 Desani became a foreign correspondent. By 1934, he was a correspondent of The Times of India. In 1936, he became a broadcaster for the B.B.C.

It was during the World War II that Desani wrote his "Medico Philosophical Grammer" All About H. Hatterr. The terrible experience of the war found perfect expression in it. In 1950, Desani wrote his Hali, which is a monument to his deeply-felt personal tragic love-affair.

Desani returned to India in July 1951 bidding good bye to London, without any fixed plans for his future. He had lost the ambition to consolidate his career as an author. The paper has been written with a view to highlighting Desani's highly creative genius and his precise contribution to the Indian English fiction.

**Keywords:** Buddhist and Hindu culture, Indian English Fiction, Experimentations, Monograph, Novel.

G.V. Desani, a former professor Emeritus of philosophy at the University of Texas at Austin, was born at Nairobi, Kenya (East Africa), on 8 July 1909. When he was not yet fourteen, he ran away from home and sitting on the bank of the Ganges, near Hardwar, had a certain spiritual experience. In 1926, at the age of seventeen, he reached U.K. asked by Molly Ramanujan whether her uncle was an impossible man, Desani's niece replied that he ran away from home repeatedly as a boy and that when he was seventeen he reached England and read in the library of the British Museum. She further said that his disappearance made his family anxious. But, she added, "Desani had been a child prodigy" (Ramanujan 11) and he had gifts no school could easily satisfy.

In 1927 Desani became a foreign correspondent. By 1934, he was a correspondent of The Times of India. In 1935, he was appointed a lecturer for the Central India Railway on the antiquities of Rajputana, Ajmer and Delhi. Then Desani moved to the Imperial institute, the

council for Adult Education in the British Armed Forces, the London country Council, and the Royal Empire Society one after another. In 1936, he became a broadcaster for the B.B.C.

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Desani returned to India in July 1951 bidding good bye to London, without any fixed plans for his future. He had lost the ambition to consolidate his career as an author. On his return to Indian, at the age of thirty-three, Desani went to Benares. There he saw the procession of beggars and lepers, which he represents in the section Eight of Hall as " "shapes of terror with udder-like chests.....bleached, of the colour of ash" (Hali 12).

From 1952 to 1966, Desani remained in seclusion in India and Burma studying about Buddhist and Hindu cultures. From 1960 to 1968, he contributed regularly to The illustrated weekly of India and also produced for eighteen months a deliberately provocative weekly opinion page called 'Very High' and 'Very Low'. He published nearly 1,70,000 words.

In 1969, he was selected as a Fulbright-Haps lecturer. He became Professor of Philosophy at the University of Texas, Austin, in 1969 and was promoted as Professor emeritus of Philosophy there in 1979. His honours include his appointment as the Distinguished Visiting Professor of Religion at the Boston University in 1981. He lectured on Theravada Buddhism and Patanjali Yoga Sutras. After his retirement, Desani has lived in seclusion to the extent that his whereabouts are not known. Giving up all ambitions, he once commented: "Resolved I'd be content with smaller and smaller, go slower and slower, have lesser and lesser. If necessary the least" (Lal 23).

There is no difference between Desani's theory and practice. He fully follows his 'Medico-philosophy'. He took great care of his body including teeth. As Molly Ramanujan says, "Desani has a thing about dentists. No matter, where, when, or why he happened to be in a place, Desani was there for the sole purpose of visiting a better dentist"(Ramanujan 9). We can hear Hatter say from the wings, "Doctor the Body" (All About H. Hatterr 95) for body and soul are one. For Desani, the best physicians are "or Diet, Dr. Quiet, and Surgeon sir Bemerry" (All About H. Hatterr 287). The result was that even at sixty, Desani looked like a person of forty.

Desani's All About H. Hatterr is an extraordinary work. It seems to be influenced by the philosophy of absurd. It is also existential in content as it tells us how to survive in this absurdist world. The World War II forced the litterateurs to devote themselves to drum-beating and bugle-sounding. The communists and Nazis devoted enormous energy to propaganda. Every country, like Dr. Goebbels, was busy in recruiting writers, painters, actors and journalists for the war effort. But below the surface, the true artists were seething with revolt against the Muses being



(Narasimhaiah 75). Later on Desani satirizes the same approach, which ultimately leads him to absurd.

During the course of his life, Hatterr has to deal with various characters who are ever seeking innocents to exploit them; He is bugged by the sages, three women and a Mysore loan-shark. Hatterr poses the pertinent question as to why one must win and the other lose. "Is nature unsocial in intent?"(All About H. Hatterr 274). Actually, there is no answer to Hatterr's question except that nature is amoral and that this is the way of the world. Life for Hatterr is an absurdist fantasy. But, living as he does, prone to neurosis in the age of anxiety, he must need have faith in the psycho-medical or Freudian approach to man.

Desani has presented Hatterr in a comic way. Hatterr is like Falstaff to be laughed at as well as with. But because Desani's comic technique is absurdist (besides being traditionally. Hatterr appeals to a modern audience. Indeed, when Desani's novel first appeared, it appealed to avant-garde readers who reaction favourably to the novel's absurdist humours. Today absurdism is an established tradition in the novel (Joseph Heller, Vonnegut, Spike Milligan, etc.) and the mass media (The Geon show, The 1948 show, Monty Python). But in 1948 Desani was ahead his time. Most likely the English-language tradition of absurdist humour originated as a "psychologically self-protective response to the barbarism and irrationality of war"(Narasimhaiah 77).

To understand the dynamic of Desani's style comic absurdist, we must consider his conception of the novel 'gesture' and the special relationship between joking on gesturing which it entails. Underlying his de ignition of in terms of gesture, is a distinction between 'overt' an gesture. In Desani's case, overt gesture is dramatic a while subtle gesture relates to his functions as an author Hatterr is, as M.K. Naik says, " a brilliant verbal gesture master of words" (Naik 20).

Possibly Desani sees Hatterr's creative logic as a reasonable substitute for that conventional rationality which fails to explain man to himself in an absurdist universe. Desani regards comedy as a healthy protection against romantic capitulation to the forces of chaos.

Desani's absurdist humour is both an original and a classical response to modern existence. It is original in the sense that he is pioneer of absurdist humor, both linguistically on psychologically. It is also classical because he speaks to our age in a "voice authentically of our age about problems of existence which many regard as central to our age"(Narasimhaiah 84). Hatterr is ennobled by the rage for order.

Twentieth-century writers like Camus, Sartre, and Beckett lean in the direction of tragedy as did Dostoevsky in Underground Man. Desani combines the eighteenth-century literary conventions of comedy (burlesque, parody, travesty, satire) with "the sensibility of the post-war generation".

On the title page of the novel, Desani states that he is writing a 'Mosaic-Organon of life'. Throughout the narrative the "Soma, pneuma, and psyche" (All About H. Hatterr 226) of man is kept as the final court of appeal under the heading of the 'medical profession'. At another place in the novel, Rambeli-Beliram says that life is a "problem, a puzzle, a riddle"(All About H. Hatterr 291).

The puzzling paradox of life gives us the absurd in literature. For Rambeli, the novel has succeeded in explaining "why we are bound to be hanged, and therefore will not drown"(All About H. Hatterr 291). He sees the novel as absurd in intentions, and points out that the key statement of the book occurs at the end of the Chapter Three. The statement "Life is contrast" means that life is a paradox, "a Blakean marriage of heaven and hell"(Ramanujan 67). He echoes Charles Lamb when he notes "nations are setting each others' house on fire to warm their dinner-plates"(All About H. Hatterr 286). He even wants to know, "what is practical ethics?"(All About H. Hatterr 294).

Rambeli is the arch guru. He was named a prince birth but wants to be called an orphan. Thus dispossessed and displaced, people like Rambeli live in a world in which each man must solve the problem of the disparity between the words thought and the world of action.

Desani is much different from the other Indian English novelists, except perhaps Raja Rao who does achieve the height that he has achieved. Desani belongs to a class by himself. R.K. Narayan may be termed unassuming and cheerful, Anand as bumptious, and Raja Rao, melancholic, but Desani is the only writer to earn the label 'strange'. His use of strange themes and techniques defy artificial classification. This left even the sedate critics breathless. His novel Hatterr is comparable only to some extent with *The Serpent and the Rope*. Raja Rao, however, views the East-west encounter from the metaphysical point devoid of colonial background, while Desani delves deep into the colonial background and thus makes a complete exploration of colonial experience in Indian English fiction. All about H. Hatterr is a classic and its author a class by himself. Desani's experimentations with themes and structures are a giant step forward in the Indian English literature.

Not much research work has been done on G.V. Desani, except Molly Ramanujan's monograph and stray articles. The present study aims at exploring the dominant themes in All About H. Hatterr the linguistic as well as fictional techniques employed in it. Hall's content and structure have also been examined briefly. This has been done with a view to highlighting Desani's highly creative genius and his precise contribution to the Indian English fiction.

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