The paper deals with the creation of a typically Indian novel, a mosaic organon of life, that uses the best traditions of Rabelaisian comedy, Dickensian satire, Joycean semantics, Shandean surprises and expatriate loneliness to portray the subversive nature of Indo-British relations, the genre of narrative representation and the literary potential of the English language stretched to breaking point. Desani’s novel *The Hatterr* (1948) satirizes the multicultural relations, the frontier and genteel American culture, the traditional Indian family life, western modernism, eastern metaphysics and the nascent Indian Diaspora in quaint Indian English. The author uses the colonial legacy of the English language against itself to poke fun at the high English culture and in the process decolonize the subject. He uses the agency of the subject to create a magical narration to subvert the greatness of western modernity and Indian classical tradition. The self-effacing and antiheroic attitude of the protagonist helps him to manipulate ideas to his advantage and wriggle out of terribly impossible situations. In each of the seven main chapters of the novel the protagonist meets seven different sages who instruct him in the art of survival. After imbibing such knowledge, the protagonist encounters real-life situations...
to test or validate the claims of such instruction. Finally he proffers a
philosophy of contrasts without a comfortable solution. In both style and
sensibility, Desani is the first postmodern writer who not only anticipates
deracinated postcolonial style but also the sense of dispossession and
deterritorialization typical of most postmodern writers. Desani’s mock-
heroic style, mixing fantasy and history, provides the literary context for
writers like Salman Rushdie and I. Allan Sealy to explore new ways of
developing style and representation.

G.V. Desani was the first Indian writer in English to use the full resources of the
western literary tradition to create a fictional genre, typically Indian in style, but
global in representation. His dexterity to lampoon national and transnational
cultures in a Rabelaisian and Dickensian fashion and yet be able to experiment
with the English language in a Joycean manner makes him a writer par
excellence. For decades The Hatter remained a minor classic in absentia, giving
a subversive twist to Indian-British relations and releasing the quintessential
flavor of the diasporic experience through a mock-heroic style. Desani taps the
rich resources of provincial Indian dialects and Anglo-Indian Pidgin English to
forge a new mock epic style with Shandean surprises to represent the warp and
woof of the Indian reality. Desani has been able to create a prose style that allows
him to “go beyond the Englishness of the English” and earn the title of Lawrence
Sterne of India. Though the Shandean twists and turn of events makes The
Hatter somewhat difficult to read, its hilarious comedy and melancholic satire
wins the heart of the reader and calls for a closer, more sympathetic reading.

Caribbean writers like Derek Walcott could develop the exciting patois or
provincial dialects of the colonial world to capture the rich flavor and tenor of
Caribbean life, which was usually, read as a subversive text to the standard
French or English. The Indian writers however could not evolve their own
Pidgin English as they excluded Anglo-Indian speech, which was considered
half-caste, colonial, and status quo but was excellent material for linguistic
ingenuity and expression. So, for Indians, writing in English has always meant
standard British or American English, which have never been supple enough to
embody typical Indian experiences. Even Caribbean writers with Indian
background like V. S. Naipaul, carrying their upper caste Hindu biases, found it
difficult to represent social reality in formal British English than writers with an
African background like Walcott who were more open to the rich resources of
the Caribbean dialects. It is precisely for this reason that when the half-caste
English in the patois of the Caribbean poets turned black, the half-caste English
in the works of Indian writers could not turn brown.

Indian writers in English now acknowledge the literary debt they owe to writers
like Desani who moved away from the pretentious and self-conscious style of
Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao towards a freer and more
colloquial language. However in the early years of the development of the Indian
novel in English most writers were either unwilling or unable to pick up and
develop the rich tradition forged by Desani. We have to wait nearly four decades
after the publication of H. Hatter (1948) for Salman Rushdie to write his
Midnight’s Children (1981) or I. Allan Sealy to compose The Trotter Nama
(1988) in a similar genre.

The Indian Novel in English
The Indian novel in English is of recent origin claiming lineage from the English
literary tradition of the nineteenth century. It is largely an “elitist enterprise” of
upper caste families who were educated in either India or abroad and felt
somewhat alienated from the Indian society. Indians invariably aligned themselves with the ideology of imperialism mimicking its language, culture and values. In the eighteenth century Din Muhammad (1759-1851) imitated the colonial discourse while Cavelli Venkata Boriah (1776-1803) replicated the culture of the Orientalists. During this time the Orientalists’ ideology of constructing ‘otherness’ as cultural difference was giving way to the Anglicists’ belief in imperial prerogatives. In the nineteenth century those who valorized and ineptly duplicated the colonial ethos were the unctuous and oleaginous babus or the native clerks liberally satirized in the nineteenth century Bengali novels of Bakim Chandra. In the early twentieth century both the babus and banias continued to be ridiculed in Indo-English fiction right from T. A. Guthrie’s Baboo Bungsho Jabberjee to Mulk Raj Anand’s “lentil-eating bania.” Though Indian writing in English during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was able to subvert the English system and its linguistic underpinnings it was no match for the stylistic dexterity and ingeniousness that Desani brought to The Hatterr. Here was the first deracinated Indian elite who could use the vast resources of the English novel from Samuel Richardson’s Clarissa to Lawrence Sterne’s The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy to express his unique bicultural sensibility and yet decenter its lineage and tradition.

In the early decades of the post-independence period Indian writing in English was still struggling to shed its colonial bondage and understand the spirit of enlightened freedom. The pain and euphoria of these early decades gave birth to novelists—like Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Manohar Malgonkar, Balachandra Rajan and Khushwant Singh—who still carried the scars of colonial injustices or the trauma of partition. However, they also shared the idealism of a new independent nation and the optimism of an emerging South Asian Diaspora. The post-1947 writers encapsulated their middle class perceptions and reactions to such themes. They represented the enervating life of middle class women, the problems of South Asian immigrants in Europe and the physical dislocation and psychological trauma caused by the partition of British India into India and Pakistan. Khushwant Singh’s Train to Pakistan (1956), Manohar Malgonkar’s Distant Drums (1960) and A Bend in the Ganges (1964) created a fictional space to represent the psychological agony of communal riots in the wake of the partition. The increase of migratory labor from India to the west, especially Canada, the United States and Great Britain, allowed writers like Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya to use their German and English connections to write about the subaltern and middle class Indian émigré, though they did not confront issues of race and law as directly as some later diasporic writers like Salman Rushdie or Hari Kunzru did. In the euphoric and yet constraining atmosphere of the post-independence decades it was rather difficult for Indian writers to write freely and boisterously like Desani.

During the 1940s the intercultural friendship and social relations across the east-west cultural divide were still in their nascent stage. Desani however was a bold and innovative writer who could reposition the English language from its bookish Oxbridge tradition towards a more colloquial and experimental genre. Desani realized the potential Anglo-Indian speech possessed and, therefore, chose an Anglo-Indian protagonist, with a hilarious name like Hatterr, to lampoon not only the cultural and linguistic underpinnings of the English language, but also the liberal political edifice of England. Desani carefully portrayed in his unique Indian English idiom both the disenchantment and world-weariness of the protagonist about issues relating to India and the sense of dispossession and loss he felt when confronting Europe. In recent years Desani’s verisimilitude and adroitness has been identified and harnessed by both literary critics such as Vinay Dharwadker and postmodernist writers like Rushdie and Sealy to
represent the Indian novel in English.⁸

Desani’s Life
Govindas Vishnoodas Desani was born in 1909 in Nairobi, Kenya to a Sindhi family. He traveled to England and later returned to India to become a correspondent for The Times of India. He was a BBC broadcaster during the 1930s and 1940s. He went to the United States in 1970 and became a professor of philosophy at Boston University and later at the University of Texas at Austin. He died in 2001. Desani was opposed to Gandhi’s non-cooperation policy during World War II and espoused eastern ideas though he criticized outmoded religious practices. He is remembered more for his largely unread novel All About H. Hatterr: a Novel (1948) and less for his mystical epic drama Hali that is read more widely. Many Indian writers in English have been deeply influenced by the rich mixing of styles, idioms and traditions in the novel Hatterr though its allusions and colloquialisms make it difficult for Indian readers and almost incomprehensible for western readers. The play, Hali, is more rooted in the imagery, symbolism and apocalyptic vision of a passion play as the protagonist goes through a series of emotional and spiritual trials and tribulations that force him to confront basic human passions and the reality of love and death. His spiritual awakening, triumph and love for humanity makes it a remarkable play that combines the religious traditions of Christianity and Hindu ascetic practices.⁹ Though Hali is a short and tightly knit play the last section “A Rose and Lilac Light” drags on for four pages when it could have been effectively condensed in a paragraph or two.¹⁰ It seems Desani was working on a second novel just before his death called “The Rissala” but the manuscript is inaccessible. Desani’s multicultural and multiracial experiences in Africa, England and the United States provide him with the diasporic experiences to write a truly expatriate novel.

The Mosaic Organon of Life—All About H. Hatterr
Set during the Second World War, the novel narrates the story of a generation scarred by the cruelties of war. Desani captures the pain and trauma of the war generation and shows how they employ psychological strategies to escape a cultural and often an existential predicament. Hatterr becomes secretive and often enigmatic in his dealing with others and develops an appalling habit of telling lies; he confesses,

“I never did a day’s honest work in my life. Didn't think it gentlemanly or dignified. Besides, I like resting. Don't like getting tired. Suppose you draw a conclusion?”¹¹

He acknowledges that he wants to escape work and lead a decadent life of a profligate.

Desani employs burlesque, striptease and comedy to represent personal and diasporic experience of his protagonist challenging the very limits of fictional signification. In the Forward to the novel Desani explains his narrative technique and point of view compellingly,

There are two of us writing this book. A fellow called H. Hatterr and I. I said to this H. Hatterr, ‘Furgoodnesssakes, you tell'em. I am shy!’ And he tells. Though I warrantee, and underwrite, the book’s his. I remain anonymous. C. As for the arbitrary choice of words and constructions you mentioned. Not intended by me to invite analysis. They are there because, I think, they are natural to H. Hatterr. But, Madam! Whoever asked a cultivated mind such as yours to submit your intellectual acumen or emotions to this H. Hatterr mind? Suppose you quote me as saying, the
Desani argues that even if the language in the novel possesses an “arbitrary choice of words and constructions” it is meant to be this way, as it suits the personality of the protagonist—it is “natural to H. Hatterr.” Hatterr possesses both “intellectual acumen” and strong “emotions” and attempts to employ “new forms of expression” while narrating his story. He admits that even though he lies to his best friend and girlfriend he is not aware of this shortcoming in his character. This is the “unconscious” creative aspect of his personality. The novel fabricates, ambulates, and creates a façade of authenticity to grasp the ungraspable experience of modern life. The novel is intriguingly titled:

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL OF H. HATTERR BEING ALSO A MOSAIC-ORGANON OF life viz., A MEDICO-PHILOSOPHICAL GRAMMAR AS TO THIS CONTRAST, THIS HUMAN HORSEPLAY, THIS DESIGN FOR DIAMOND-CUT-DIAMOND

...H. HATTERR

BY

H. HATTERR

AND

Commissioned solely by his publishers

AN AFTERTHOUGHT

Entitled

WITH IRON HAND, I DEFEND …

By

504 Sriman Y. Rambeli

Undoubtedly the novel is a mosaic, an organon of life, a set of rules to communicate and represent the knowledge and philosophy of life. The writer is able to successfully capture the incommensurable and multi-faced philosophical paradigms in his net of words and vocabulary. The novel is also a “medico-philosophical grammar” of Indian thought speaking through the sages and the gathered essence of sacred books. And Desani’s Rabelaisian comedy is the finest “human horseplay” that has ever been written in Indian writing in English. The novel also deals with guile, duplicity and deceit typical of the best cultures and societies and, therefore, it is aptly subtitled—“diamond-cut-diamond.” In an undercutting, ironic tone Desani concludes that in most developed societies self-interest still rules the roost. Hatterr possesses the ability to tell an improbable tale and make it credible:

Improbable, you say?

No, fellers.

All improbables are probables in India.

H. HATTERR
Hatterr himself is a rather improbable protagonist in modern Hindu India, a representive of the marginalized Christian minority and, an orphan:

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 Peninsula-resident lady, a steady non-voyaging, non-Christian human (no mermaid). From which part of the Peninsula? Couldn't tell you either.\textsuperscript{13}

His family came from Penang, then part of the Malay Peninsula, to East India when Hatterr was one year old. Soon afterwards his father died of malaria and pneumonia and the court gave the infant boy to “a Dundee-born Scot” jute trader instead of his mother for adoption:

Rejoicing at the just conclusion of the dictate of his conscience, and armed with the legal interpretation of the testament left by my post-mortem seaman parent, willing I be brought up Christian, and the court custody award, the jute factor had me adopted by an English Missionary Society, as one of their many Oriental and mixed-Oriental orphan-wards. And, thus it was that I became a sahib by adoption, the Christian lingo (English) being my second vernacular from the orphan-adoption age onwards.\textsuperscript{14}

Hatterr sees himself as an Indian who has learned his “sweet and bitter “lessons from “the school of Life,” which teaches painfully but rather well.\textsuperscript{15} He always desires to go to England but remains a drifter suffering the pangs of loneliness and disorientation.

All my life I wanted to come: come to the Western shores, to my old man’s Continent, to the Poet-Bard’s adored Eldorado, to England, the God’s own country, the seat of Mars, that damme paradise, to Rev. the Head’s mother and father-land, to the Englishman’s Home, his Castle, his garden, fact’s, the feller’s true alma mammy and apple-orchard.\textsuperscript{16}

The yearning, the false sense of hope, and failed aspirations all turn Hatterr into an autobiographical writer. Hatterr believes that writing can provide an emotional release, secure him a living and connect him to the larger world outside. He writes his own story in order to “shield himself from further blows of Fate” and “end his “drifting”, “isolation” and “deprivation of grub.”\textsuperscript{17} Here are all the elements of postcolonial novel that would emerge in the 1980s in the writings of Rushdie and Sealy.

Through the agency of a middle-aged Anglo-Indian scalawag Desani tells a comic story. Hatterr seems to be a bumbling idiot but he hides within him an unsurpassed wisdom and stamina to renew and rediscover himself constantly. Hatterr cannot comprehend the wisdom he receives from the seven sages of India (namely The Sage of Calcutta, Rangoon, Madras, Bombay, Delhi, Mogalsarai-Varanasi and All-India) through his sheer lack of ability or their fakery. He passes through many stages in life—married man, professional, criminal and saint—and finally develops his own philosophy of life. In this pursuit he is aided with his Indian friend Nath C. Banerjji, his versatile lawyer Yati Rambeli, and his dog Jenkins. Indeed the novel combines the startlingly Joycean linguistic experiments, painful diasporic contradictions, pleasantly Rabelaisian comedy and dark Dickensian satire to make it one of the “most original” creations of Indian literature in English, a “total” novel.\textsuperscript{18}

Even while granting the praise to Hatterr for creating a uniquely Indian idiom in
fiction, the novel remains exasperatingly difficult to read even for fellow Indians who could be familiar with the context. Reading Desani’s quaint syntax may give the reader a headache, but if the reader persists the style becomes interesting. As Hatterr admits the novel possesses,

“…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 their sthula (gross), the sukshama (subtle) and para (supreme) planes, and levels, and still miss the issue and dash their heads against the crazy-paved rock of confusion.”

If the reader can discover the meaning of the novel on three levels—the gross, subtle and supreme—he can unravel its mystery and enjoy its content. If not then he can be terribly confused.

The personality of the Hatterr needs some more elaboration. Though an uneducated half-caste in Indian society, fifty-five year old Hatterr is also half-English (“I have been baptized”) and half-Indian (“I am a half-heathen brother of man.”). His biracial position accords him the status of a sahib and membership of the white Club. With a “fifty-fifty Oriental mind” he dreams of gaining the admiration of the world and “establishing H. Hatterr dynasty.” But when he rejects the sexual advances of an Indian dhobin or washerwoman he gets into trouble. Feeling slighted the dhobin makes a scene at the Club accusing him for not paying her bills. The Club Secretary Harcourt Pankhurst-Sykes summons an extraordinary meeting of the Club, which not only censures Hatterr’s behavior but also decides to forfeit his membership. Angered by the Club’s decision Hatterr forsakes his sahib identity and decides to go “completely Indian” (his initial H. stands for “Hindustananiwalla” and Hatterr implies a man whose head is too large for his hat) more than other “pure non-Indian blood sahib fellers.”

Through his friend Banerrji, he meets an extreme-wing Indian Mr. Chari-Charier who runs a daily newspaper Bazaar and gets employed as a news reporter. On his first assignment to interview the “Sage of the Wilderness,” Hatterr gets drunk on five or six glasses of highly intoxicating todi, the beer of the tropics, and fails miserably. The Sage, a fake mahatma, fleeces him of all his belongings including his clothes and leaves him guessing about his motive. Hatterr soon discovers that the Sage together with his brother once ran a second hand clothes business in Lucknow and has now discovered an easy way to procure second hand clothes.

Hatterr’s highly educated Indian friend Banerrji, well versed in English jurisprudence, psychoanalysis and Shakespeare, aids and counsels him at critical junctures of life. After Hatterr goes through many misadventures Banerrji advises him to go to England. As Banerrji explains in his own inimitable manner:

One day, you will be a great man. You will then have ample opportunities of serving India. I have faith in your eminently Christian nature. I have never doubted that. This country, excuse me, is not Christian. But she needs service offered with selfless Christianity. Unless mysticism and religion attracts you, I advise you, go to the Western Hemisphere. England is the place for you. England is easy to stimulate. You will progress there. In England, there is a State Church. Religion is the business of the State... You can remain in India as long as you wish. Excuse me, I have advised out of love. Please, I repeat, go West, young man, go West!

Though Hatterr agrees to go to England he is so terribly moved by Banerrji’s...
Hatterr's desire to go to England and his love for India predicts the paradoxical sentiments of the modern South Asian diaspora in Europe and America. Banerrji in his own inimitable way critiques both the pretentious religious attitude of the east and the Christian work ethic of the west.

Multicultural relations are invariably fraught with difficulties. Banerrji introduces Hatterr to a circus-man Mr. Bill Smythe and his aggressive wife and lion-tamer Rosie who are looking for a replacement for their runaway Portuguese Braganza in their London Lion Circus act. Once Hatterr's illicit passion for Rosie gets aroused he is ready to do anything for her including becoming a human plate for the steak-eating lion Charlie. As the lion chews the steak off his chest, Hatterr has a whole hallucinatory dream from South Dakota, St. Paul's Cathedral London to the operation theatre of a Surgical Ward Emergency Clinic. He first watches six tall Americans smoking Havana cigars called Cosmos and another six dwarfs called Dwight come out of the saloon and then participate in his own funeral. The Cosmos begin dancing a turkey trot and then a Virginia reel to Bach's St. Matthew Passion in the nude till they are reprimanded for indecency in public. After they comply they begin dancing a rumba with the vocals provided by the Dwights to the chant: *Switch on the headlights, for God's sake!* to which they respond with *Cock, I'll block off yer ruddy knock, so help me!*

Desani pokes gentle fun at the entire frontier, folk and genteel American culture. The scene shifts and he finds himself inside the St. Paul's Cathedral with a beautiful teak and alabaster coffin on which is embossed in Gothic a string of appellation beginning with “H. HATTER, ESQR. (ENGLAND), HON. TREASURER” carried by Leonardo da Vinci, Goethe, Gauss and Beethoven with Dante in attendance.

In the third scene Hatterr finds himself on the operation table surrounded by hooded figures, a stocking-less ward-sister reciting Bengali poems of Rabindranath Tagore to an M.D. Before the surgeon is about to tear off his appendix he reveals himself as Old Harry the lion. Hatterr entreats the lion not to remove his appendix as “what good is an appendix without an autobiographical” implying that Hatterr needs it more to live than the lion. As Hatterr boards the train he feels both he and Braganza have been victimized by the titillating promise of sexual fulfillment by the Smythes—

“Damme, a simpleton like you wouldn't know that some fellers knowingly excite other fellers' libidos, through the via media of their wives, and make the mugs serve their purpose! Damme, make the eternal triangle pay out a dividend! First the Portuguese feller victimized, then self! Damme, sexploitation!”

But Hatterr's friend Banerrji thinks otherwise. Banerrji believes that Hatterr has undergone a “death struggle” between his “inborn goodness” and the “Vienna libido school” and has made his inborn goodness triumph—“You are merely overwrought. There has been within you, excuse me, a great conflict between the immortal moral values and the desires of the flesh.”

Though Hatterr vengefully denies his sahib status, he cannot deny his half-English identity, which once more bestows on him the sahib status that allows him access to both the sahib culture and indigenous secrets. He speaks in a
quaint English idiom that he claims is a Christian lingo, his “second vernacular.”

Armed with his quaint English he boards a “tramp ship” to England to discover his father’s country leaving behind his grieving Indian friend Banerrji. As Hatterr’s ship reaches the Liverpool docks he is terribly disappointed by the unexpected industrial hellhole he encounters—

“All my life I wanted to come: come to the Western shores, to my old man’s Continent, to the Poet-Bard’s adorned Eldorado, to England, the God’s own country, the seat of Mars, that damme paradise, to Rev. the Head’s mother and fatherland, to the Englishman’s Home, his Castle, his garden, fact’s, the feller’s true alma mammy and apple-orchard. And, now, I had arrived! The realization made me feel humble, and O.H.M.S. post-haste, thank Almighty for same!”

Looking for a means to become rich he pursues many hair-brained schemes such as digging up a pyramid to search for diamonds but instead finds five fleeing mice. Then he writes a novel in “rigmarole English” to become rich and famous:

“I have written the work for one good reason: to shield myself from further blows of Fate, and to ensure me against drifting from isolation to utter eclipse, and, perhaps, deprivation of grub.”

The novel questions western modernism and defends the spiritual and metaphysical traditions of the east, yet marvels at the Indian propensity of creating gurus of questionable character. Most characters try to understand their existence through psychoanalytical assumptions, spiritual symbiosis, dream logic, erotic poetry or other methods of interpretation.

Desani uses the colonial legacy embodied in the English language against itself and transform the linguistic medium to liberate and decolonize his subject. His magical narrative does not aim to represent the Indian reality but to undermine some of the presuppositions about the all-encompassing greatness of modernity. Desani is different from modern day magical realists in the sense that his abstruseness and opaqueness are deliberate attempts to mask his real meaning, to show the incommensurability of the medium with the subject in mind. This subtle method of debunking modernity makes some people see him as a postmodernist writer.

In his search for wisdom, wealth and women Hatterr encounters one of the most preposterous situations after meeting charlatans, swindlers, seductresses, imposters and hoodlums but invariably gets out of harm’s way through a dexterous manipulation of situation and using his self-effacing and anti-heroic attitude. At the top of the list of his acquaintances, apart from his dear friend Banerrji, are the seven ‘sages’ he meets and each of these meetings gives shape to the each of the seven main chapters of the book. Each sage provides specific ‘instruction’, which Hatterr distills and afterwards makes a ‘presumption’; while each presumption is followed by an interesting real ‘life-encounter’.

The first sage, the Sage of Calcutta, tells him the story of the crafty potter Ali Bee and his fluent parrot Ahmed instructing him to master the technique of “dispelling credible illusions” and to be always suspicious of others’ motives. Through the sage’s instruction Hatterr presumes that some ‘fellers’ always debunk, oppose and hate everything they encounter. His ‘life-encounter’ narrates the story of how he becomes broke, in debt and gets involved with a vamp. The Sage of Rangoon, the second religious imposter, instructs him to destroy his desire for physical gratification: “In the female lies moral degradation. I say save thyself from amorous temptation!” Hatterr presumes that Cupid and her
victims are both blind and non-rational which presumption is exemplified by the
two women he encounters—his wife Rialto, a titillating seductress and nag who
leaves him and Rosie the lion tamer who beguiles him into dangerous situations
through her sexual charms. The third ‘wise man’, the Sage of Madras instructs
him to become a vegetarian once a week to overcome greed and avarice, but
when Hatterr cannot answer the two questions on the same theme the Sage of
Madras becomes incensed and refers him to another wise man the Sheikh Ell
Seen Arabi. The Sheikh ‘instructs’ Hatterr to become a prosperous ‘burrasahib’
by exploiting upper class connections and following the dress code of an elite
‘brotherhood’. 33 Hatterr’s presumption: youth is an ugly age. In the ‘Life-
Encounter’ section he dreams of being inside La Scala, Milan where he listens to
maestro Toscanini conducting the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra. 34 Then he
meets a swindler who coaxes him to borrow money and forces him into a
litigious lawsuit. Meanwhile Hatterr loses his job with sandalwood wholesaler
and in order to escape the payment of 600 rupees and fearing court action he
changes his identity and becomes a mendicant—“The fakir fellers in the bush are
free men”. 35 Desani debunks both the religious traditions of the east and the west
by explaining that:

In India, if you decide to go religious, be a semi-Benedictine, a sacred
chicken, belong to the Cloth, no need to hullaballo (sic) at all. You simply
cast off clothing. You wear the minimum loincloth, 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 theologia-indica in a nut-shell for you.

In return you receive offerings of food. You are not supposed to possess
any belongings, and if you are a true feller, you treat the whole world as
your home and diocese, you love no one in particular, and serving and
helping those who believe in your purpose—and that’s your sole affair of
the parish.

The East has always honoured the men of Right Purpose, who renounce
pleasures and comforts, and who have no home, but who roam the earth.
Truly, such a man was Christ Jesus, a penniless feller, yet a Lord, of
Lordly Courage, and another such was one Siddhartha Gautama, son of
Maya, a Queen of India, later the hallowed teacher, the right and wise
Buddha. 36

These grand sentiments cannot lessen the discomfort of a mendicant’s life in the
forest. Mosquitoes in the bush bite him and he becomes pessimistic with the
daily discomfort of outdoor life. He gives up the desire to be happy. He quickly
understand that you need money and the courage to “hit below the belt” in order
to be successful in religious pursuit. There are obviously “sharp-shooters” in
Christianity too, men who “profess Christ” but do not want to “court
crucifixion”. 37

Meanwhile his friend Banerjii tells the court that Hatterr has been eaten up by a
tiger. In the woods Hatterr meets a young Indian mendicant, Sadanand XX
(Always Happy) or the Archbishop Walrus of Behar, a runaway commission
agent for a privately run lottery business, one of the “counterfeit chaps” as he
terms him. Together they beat up another mendicant Hiramanek Mukti or
Diamonds and Rubies forcing him to leave the town and his lucrative diocese,
which is taken over by Hatterr and his young mendicant. 38 But Always Happy
presents Hatterr to the gullible town folks as one who has destroyed all erotic
desires by going through the ‘last sadhana,’ a practice involving ‘amputation’ of
the male organ or “alternatively, bruising or crushing of the stones.” When Banerji praises him for conducting or contemplating the last sadhana Hatterr denies it vehemently:

“Balderdash! Balderdash, man! You are losing your pants, Banerji! You are getting out of focus, man! The last sadhana! Damme, I am as whole as you are! Not even the Jewish national! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you for nothing!”

At this point in life Hatterr begins to develop his own philosophy of life that he wishes to leave for posterity like Einstein Theory of Relativity. His “self-realized” and “medico-philosophical conclusion” is simply this: “Life is contrast.” Hatterr explains that there are always opposites or contrasts in life that every man confronts—

“Take anything and you will find the opposite! Banerji, imagination boggles at the contrasts I have indexed for reference purposes!”

The fourth ‘wise man’ Hatterr meets is the Sage of Bombay who gives him an “indirect lesion” or instruction by narrating the story of the beautiful princess the Leopardess of Bhoongal. The princess loves roses and devotes herself to designing “intricate architecture” but refuses to entertain the thought of marriage. In order to ward off amatory suitors she advertises in matrimonial journals that she would only marry someone who is ready to be slapped by her a thousand times a day. This mandatory condition does not deter a cutler to propose marriage to her; but when one fine morning she slaps him he takes out his wrath on an unsuspecting monkey that happens to peep into the room from a window. The princess begs him to stop. He stops beating the monkey with his bedroom slippers with the menacing words: “those who disturb my peace thus, are disturbed by me thus!” After the incident the princess never ever “tyrannized” the cutler; she learnt an “indirect lesson.” Hatterr presumes that the “indirect” and the “unexpected” action possesses the “wonder-making element.” His “life-encounter” begins with a question he poses to his dog Jenkins:

“There is a free agent or do the gods intervene in his life?”

But Jenkins gives him an “unashamed straight look” without giving an answer.

The Sage of Delhi teaches him, “all Appearance is false. Reality is not Appearance.” Though Hatterr is awed by the mystery of the universe the sage reminds him to distinguish between appearance and reality through the story of a python devouring a rat,

Yet upon investigation, I found the factor of that eerie incredible Appearance. A python was behind the thicket. Lashed by the fury of hunger, it was slowly devouring the furless carcass of a rat, whose paw, exposed to my sight, on the outside of the thicket, quickened as the consequence. This gave me the illusion of being beckoned from behind the thicket. Satisfied, I passed on, blessing the breathing devourer and the dead devoured, for they obeyed the Creator’s Law of Causes and sub-Causes.

Hatterr confesses that once he developed a “passion for maps,” a kind of “mapomania” and began hunting for the treasure looted from the Moghuls by Shivaji and the Marhatta soldiers, now buried somewhere in the Western Ghats.
In looking for the treasure he gets involved with Ananda, procures 200 rupees and goes to UP, Mewar to look for Shivaji’s buried treasure in the Western Ghats. Here he meets a sage in a bush, gets into a fight with him, and loses all his money. He then wires his friend for help and wonders why evil triumphs:

Apropos the Presumption: Well, why Evil triumphs?
All Evil-Triumphant is assessed by man as Pain, as Disappointment, as Disillusionment, as Frustration, the only translation-capacity the human apparatus of understanding has: —Well, why?
Maybe, things are made that way.
All the same, I wish I could grant that Naga feller the quo warranto right to touch me and make me feel as down in the depths as he did: except conceding that Satan acts through apparent goodness, through rahasyam, doctrine and righteousness, and religion: the apparent spirituality: the false Karma Yoga, the false God, the false God-wardship: the false notion of all, the false understanding of all. The Fiend, in the urgent purpose of applying pain-plaster to man (ultimate blistering is assured and eternally guaranteed), approaches a victim, soft! soft! Like a pussyfoot, and often through human agents, who, though themselves minus the demonic strain, and A1 chaps—yet, subserving and ministering to Evil—are the Fiend incarnate!

The interrogation of the “existence of evil” becomes imperative for Hatterr as it is connected to his childhood experience of physical and emotional loss. Hatterr admits to his friend Banerji that he lost his mother early in life and has no relatives at all:

“I haven’t had my mother to love me. Not long enough, old friend. I have no relations, don’t you see? I am afraid, can’t you see?”

Baneerji advises him to trust in God and Hatterr admits that even if God does not exist it is worth loving him:

“‘I can’t help it, old feller. I can’t loving God. Even if He isn’t here, even if He doesn’t care. I can’t help loving God. I think He is my father, like my governor. I think He looks after my mum, like my dad used to.’”

He then meets the Sage of Mogalsarai-Varanasi who guides him through the labyrinth of man-woman relationship, the baffling concept of kismet, music, vernacular, lingua franca, erotic poetry and marital discord. The Sage admits that the ways of men and women might appear “mystifying” to each other but it is an equally mystifying fate or kismet that brings them together. Hatterr admits that he entered into matrimony, a Christian marriage, with Rialto or “the waxed Kiss-curl” to raise a family:

All I know is that I wanted to raise a family: add to the world’s vital statistics and legitimate: have a niche in the community, for my own kid, to hand out the wager till the end. And since you can’t achieve this without a wife—the neighbours wouldn’t let you! The police wouldn’t let you!—I equipped myself with the blarney-phrases, convinced this female that she was real jam, had me led to the middle aisle and gave the ready ‘I do’ to the amenwallah her brother had hired for the occasion.

Though Kiss-curl was a “museum-piece,” a “queer-card” and had not given him a child he continues to be fond of her as he finds her “dam’ funny.” Banerri hits upon an idea to resolve the matrimonial dispute between Hatterr and his wife
by organizing a Music Arts conferral ceremony for Hatterr. He organizes a reception committee of the bard Keemat Ram Shastri and Mr. Bhola Sing, the roarer. The conferral turns into a burlesque as the bard is hit by a mystical stroke while reciting erotic poetry and has to be carried out by Hatterr and Banerji. It starts to rain and Kiss-Curl enters peeved seeing her furniture getting wet in the rain. She disrupts the ceremony reprimanding everyone. These according to Hatterr are the mysteries of both fate and women:

It was ‘Kismet’, pure and simple—or what do you think?
I married a woman like Kiss-curl, waxed and all, because it was fate (as it were).50

Hatterr soon discovers the instruction provided by the earlier six sages as meaningless and he quickly abandons them all. He finally goes to meet the Sage of All-India who is meditating on the summit of snow-clad Himalayas to find out if “joint-cunning” can “undo single-minded vigilance,” to get instructed in that “one mighty aphorism” that can make him wise.51 Here Hatterr realizes he had been ashamed of his origin, his “stem, pedigree and pater-and-mater.”52 He wonders if nature is “unsocial in intent” and arrives at his “medico-philosophy” of contrasts which forces man to accept things as they are:

What a Show. Meanwhile, while contrasts are contrasting, man’s got to execute somersaults, and function. That is Law. There is a hell of an itch in man to be, to function, and its Compulsion!
What about that?
I say accept!
No dam’ use in any case. Accept: and say aye!
Things are. They are there. Good and bad. To hell with judging, it’s Take it don’t leave it, and every man for himself!53

Though Hatterr is about to give up on judging human actions, his own lawyer Y. Rambeli writes a critique of his work under the heading:

With Iron Hand, I Defend You,
Mr H. Hatterr, Gentleman!

In fact, Rambeli eulogizes Hatterr’s actions and condones his faults:

The author, H. Hatterr, did not say so. He stood firm. He faced those muggers, although a scalded cat is entitled to fear an iced siphon. He was the real hero. He stood alone. He rejected the cozy Sir Alma-Tadema interiors of his sahib club friends. He preferred the dust and company of fellahins of the Orient. Other men would not do this. Other men have a fig ready for everybody. They think the best place to have an itch is on another man’s skin. They play safe.. There are no lions in the path of such pukka muggers. They patronize only the pigs of their own sows. They don’t make physicians their heirs. They would not dig rocks so that humanity may get diamonds. On the contrary, because of their mala fides, you may pay for their spurious ‘diamonds.’54

Rambeli wants everyone, especially the “progressive classes” to read the novel and learn through the “scenario” of Hatterr and “wake up” to the “true reality of the world.”55

The linguistic mosaic of The Hatterr provides a true organon of incommensurable universes and their philosophical paradigms that may not
come together but can coexist. Desani captures too much and critiques the Anglo-American and Indian worldviews finally providing an inexplicable theory of contrasts, a kind of acceptance of the world on its own terms. The novel ends with the immigrant rider that even if the expatriate experience is one of painful disenchantment, “living well” in the country of adoption is the “best revenge” of the émigré.56

**Notes and References**

1. T. S. Eliot reading called the novel an extraordinary experience: “In all my experience, I have not met with anything like this.”
2. See Salman Rushdie, “Introduction,” Mirrorwork: 50 Years of Indian Writing: 1947-1997, ed. Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West, (Henry Holt & Co., 1997), p. xviii. Rushdie writes: “The writer I have placed alongside Narayan, G. V. Desani, has fallen so far from favour that the extraordinary All About H. Hatterr is presently out of print everywhere, even in India. Milan Kundera once said that all modern literature descends from either Richardson’s Clarissa or Sterne’s Tristram Shandy, and if Narayan is India’s Richardson then Desani is his Shandean other. Hatterr’s dazzling, puzzling, leaping prose is the first genuine effort to go beyond the Englishness of the English language. His central figure, ‘fifty-fifty of the species,’ the half-breed as unabashed anti-hero, leaps and capers behind many of the texts in this book. Hard to imagine I. Allan Sealy’s Trotter-Nama without Desani. My own writing, too, learned a trick or two from him,” p. 18.
5. For an analysis of the orientalist and anglicist controversy see Balachandra Rajan, Under Western Eyes: India from Milton to Macaulay, (London: Duke university Press, 1999) see especially Chapter 9, “Macaulay: The Moment and the Minute, pp. 174-97. Rajan believes that the orientalists were without a “constituency” in Europe and England while the utilitarian and evangelical movements gave the anglicists a national character. The orientalists saw ‘otherness’ as cultural difference and dealt with religious essences while the anglicists reckoned with imperial prerogatives not universalism. (p. 191).
7. Vinay Dhardwadker, “Formations of Indian-English Literature,” in Literary Cultures in

9. The novel has played hide and seek with the readers and literary public at large since its publication in 1948. It went out of publication in 1951, surfaced as a modern classic in the 1970 with a laudatory introduction by Sir Anthony Burgess. Then once more went into obscurity till it was reclaimed by Salman Rushdie in 1981and is again out of print. Also see Vinay Dhardwadker, “Formations of Indian-English Literature,” in Literary Cultures, pp. 199-267.
15. Desani, All About H. Hatterr, p. 32.
17. Desani, All About H. Hatterr, p. 43.
18. David Mc Cutchion, Indian Writing in English, (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1969) where Mc Cutchion calls the Hatterr the “most original creation of Indian literature in English” (p. 6). Also see Srinavasa Iyengar, Indian Writing in English, (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1962), p. 340. Also see P. Lal, The Concept of an Indian Literature: Six Essays, (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1968), pp. 41-49. P. Lal praises Desani by saying that, “Desani’s zest, supple language, and ability to communicate, half-ironically, half-seriously, whole chunks of emotional experience and whole segments of what he describes as ‘life-encounters,’ have set standards it is desperate to ignore. Hatterr is that rare thing: a ‘total’ novel” (p. 47).
30 Desani, All About H. Hatterr, ibid. p. 36.
32 Desani, All About H. Hatterr, ibid. p. 63.
35 Desani, All About H. Hatterr, ibid. p. 117.
36 Desani, All About H. Hatterr, ibid. p. 118.
37 Desani, All About H. Hatterr, ibid. p. 119.
38 Desani, All About H. Hatterr, ibid. pp. 120-21.
41 Desani, All About H. Hatterr, ibid. pp. 159-60.
43 Desani, All About H. Hatterr, ibid. p. 192.
44 Desani, All About H. Hatterr, ibid. pp. 192-93.
46 Desani, All About H. Hatterr, ibid. p. 223.
47 Desani, All About H. Hatterr, ibid. p. 223.
49 Desani, All About H. Hatterr, ibid. p. 228.
50 Desani, All About H. Hatterr, ibid. p. 250.
51 Desani, All About H. Hatterr, ibid. p. 251.
55 Desani, All About H. Hatterr, ibid. p. 286.
56 Desani, All About H. Hatterr, ibid. p. 286.