

**“Ambiguity at its Best!”: Historicizing
G.V. Desani’s *All About H. Hatterr***

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Following the excitement surrounding the novel’s appearance in 1948—T.S. Eliot famously claimed, “In all my experience, I have not met with anything like it.”—Desani and *All About H. Hatterr* were largely disregarded until being briefly rediscovered in the 1970s by American academics following the novel’s reissue and the author’s move to the University of Texas in Austin in 1968 to teach philosophy. Although in recent years writers of no less stature than Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy have laid claim to Desani as a major influence upon their work, no significant new readings of *All About H. Hatterr* have been attempted that resituate the novel in its own significant historical moment or that complicate the modernist readings that have proven so influential in dehistoricizing Desani in the first place. My purpose in this essay is both to historically recontextualize *All About H. Hatterr* and to offer a modernist reading of the novel that does not merely locate Desani on the tattered stylistic coattails of James Joyce but rather reinvestigates the author’s complex relationship to his most celebrated source of influence as a calculated re-authoring and as a critical response to the excesses of Indian nationalist discourse.

First, however, some general comments about the novel’s overall structure. The narrative structure of *All About H. Hatterr* consists of seven episodes containing numerous encounters by H. Hatterr with various sages and holy men, who invariably turn out to be more (or often less) than they seem. Each chapter is prefaced with a “Digest,” which poses the central question(s) supposedly asked or answered by the action of the chapter. For example, from chapter one:

The following raises the *questions*: Can fellers reclaim blood from lice? Has a man a chance in the world, or is it the fate of an icicle in Hades? By St Mungo, is there any justice-giustizia

in the Globe? Or is it survival of the fittest and yet another man gone West? If a feller can survive the kiss of a cobra, can he survive the kiss of an embittered woman? Has endurance any antiseptic influence on men and things? What say you of this secondhand goods dealer? Read on fellers. . . (39)

Following the digest is an "Instruction," featuring a conversation between Hatterr and a series of Indian Sages, of Calcutta, Rangoon, Madras, Bombay, Mogalsari-Varanasi, and, finally, of All-India. The first of these is worth noting because it contains instruction for reading the book. The Sage of Calcutta tells the story: once an Indian Maharaja was engaged, as was his wont, in sexual congress with a chambermaid, when a booming voice commands him, "Stop fool!" Running to the window, the Maharaja sees only a dove flying away. Offering a reward of half his empire and his empress in marriage to whoever can identify the source of the voice, the Maharaja is approached by a humble potter who claims that he owned a talking parrot whose cage was snatched away by a hawk at precisely the time of the Maharaja's engagement with the chambermaid. The bird cried out "Stop fool!" at the hawk and not the Maharaja. Though infuriated by this revelation, the Maharaja nevertheless keeps his promise and offers half his kingdom and his empress in marriage to the poor potter. Hatterr is perplexed as to the moral of the tale and submits to the Sage that the chambermaid must have been relieved to hear that the voice belonged merely to the parrot and not to a deity. Rebuking him for such a ridiculous answer, the Sage reveals that the moral of the story is in fact that "A wise man, therefore, must master the craft of dispelling credible illusions. He should be *suspicious*" (41). For it was not the potter's bird who admonished the Maharaj but rather the Empress herself, an adept ventriloquist speaking through a length of bamboo tube. What interests me most in this curious tale is that there are no embedded clues leading us to its eventual resolution. Neither Hatterr nor the reader could possibly be expected to deduce, from the information provided in the text, the fable's illogical denouement. Likewise, the reader of *Hatterr* must be suspicious and adept at dispelling the credible illusions within Desani's polyphonic text, willing to see through the pratfalls of the novel

to the social and political commentaries that they often conspicuously conceal and, therefore, illuminate. And like the Empress in the story, Desani is a master ventriloquist, writing in “rigmarole English, staining your goodly godly tongue, maybe” (37), misappropriating the language of the conqueror and rendering it “other.”

Desani, however, does frustratingly little to help us historicize his only novel. Despite the fact that *Hatterr* is written at precisely the climactic moments of India's independence and the horrors of partition that follow, no clear trace of these extraordinary historical events is directly evidenced in the events of the novel. Though much of the book's action is set some years earlier during the initial decline of the Raj, the fact that Desani seems largely to ignore the seismic political events of 1947–8, might appear to justify those who designate him an apolitical modernist in the same mold as the canonical Joyce, more interested in stylistic play and aesthetics than in the material realities of his day. I do not, for obvious reasons, dispute comparisons with Joyce, but in the same way that Joyce has been in recent years successfully recuperated from a high modernist aestheticism, Desani too must be critically re-read against the events that shaped his world and, as I hope to show, his single work of fiction.

All About H. Hatterr was published with the original subtitle “A Gesture.” While little enough has been written about the possible significance of this subtitle, I submit that it is one of the essential indicators that *Hatterr* is not aesthetically immured against the historical events of its epoch but is in fact rigorously engaging them at their very roots. In one of the few analyses of the gestural in Desani, S.C. Harrex offers that “beneath the surface cavalcade of wit and fantasy, of language-fission and mad Hatterr's adventures, complex issues are seriously alluded to” (74). These issues are, in Harrex's reading, however, both metaphysical in nature and universal in application. For Harrex, Desani's comic gesture is read as informed by the tradition of European Existentialist philosophy and intended to “illustrate the thesis that life is fundamentally absurd” (78). As he writes:

Desani's absurdist humor is both an original and classical response to modern existence: original in that he is a pioneer of

absurdist humor, both linguistically and psychologically; classical in the sense that he has spoken to our age in a voice authentically of our age about the problems of existence which many regard as central to our age. (84)

The casual repetition of totalizing phraseology (the “our” is particularly distressing) and sweeping observations that “the ultimate truth is that life is absurd” effectively unmoor *Hatterr* from its historical occasion and set it adrift on the quick current of universal history, allowing Harrex to identify in Desani’s “spirit of comic vitality” an uninterrupted continuation of “the metaphysical problem that so intrigued Shakespeare in his last play” (85). Likewise, in the only book-length study of Desani’s work to date, Molly Ramanujan interprets his deployment of the gestural as revealing a “disparity between the noumenal and the phenomenal” that emphatically, if humorously, indicates “the nonteleological and a-causal nature” of human action itself (52, 69). In other words, both these readings identify an absurdist epistemological and agential crisis in Desani, a paralyzing absence of historical agency and a telling retreat into deeply philosophical musings of a universalist stripe (Ramanujan 70).

More satisfactory than these readings is Paul Sharrad’s historically inflected analysis, which posits gesture as “a performative sign that stands in opposition to the cool fixity of writing and administration” (136). The gesture is a strategic articulation, Sharrad contends, because the resonant ambiguity and ludic anarchism that render it subject to containment and dismissal also enable it to exist within and simultaneously resist oppressive structures of power. Sharrad compares the gestural performance of *Hatterr* to such ambiguous moments in literature and history as the African warrior woman in *Heart of Darkness*, the battle of Wounded Knee, and Gandhi’s symbolic salt march. Such ambiguous gestures become “*topoi* in textual struggles over their powerfully complex signification” and cannot, Sharrad maintains, be comprehended apart from their colonial contexts (136):

‘Post-coloniality,’ drawing on the trickster-motifs of its literatures as much as on the slipperiness of Derridean signifiers, should perhaps be seen as a gesture, a partial and temporary

truth, a motley routine that serves for a while to keep the tourists from the metropolis at bay while demanding that they recognize the presence of an Other. (138)

Thus, gestural comparisons with Joyce reveal a more politically minded Desani than has heretofore been recognized. In *Gestural Politics: Stereotype and Parody in Joyce*, Christy L. Burns offers a reading of the *art of gesture* (which she interprets as a particularly physical brand of parody) as it appears in Joyce's work:

In fragments of *Stephen Hero* and in *Ulysses*, we are given glimpses of an art of gesture, which serves to combine materiality with meaning, body with spirit, sense with essence. These gestures are forms of parody, more than traditional marriages of meaning and matter, for they take a norm (a recognizable gesture) and distortively pass it through the artistic body and mind. (9)

For Joyce, Burns argues, the art of gesture provides a way of uniting the abstract and the physical, the material and immaterial, in a way that reveals "the materiality of language as a medium" and thus as a socially determined (political) phenomenon (17). Through its parodic incorporation of the body, Burns claims, "this gestural art progressively associates it with the problems of the limits of representation and its relation to desire, corporeality, and more general aspects of societal exchange" (22). Traces of this gestural sense of language can be found as well in Desani's decidedly Joycean penchant for a brand of wordplay that self-consciously mixes the abstract and the material. For example, recounting a verbally abusive altercation with a false fakir of the Naga order ("the Naked Ones"), Hatterr writes: "Meanwhile, look at this feller, *bomb-blasting* right and left!" (215, emphasis added). Like the mature Joyce, Desani delights in imaginatively linking language with its material effects so that the implicit violence of the Naga's words is amplified by reference to its real-world consequence or (perhaps hyperbolic) material equivalent. One might likewise take for example the description of Hatterr's residence as a "humble belle-vue-no-view, cul-de-sack-the tenant" (33) or the congratulatory sentiments in Beliram's note, "Bless my sole! what a feet!" (318). Also like Joyce, Desani frequently utilizes

this philological play for comic effect, and like those of his literary mentor, Desani's laughs are seldom without a historically inflected edge.

We must not be too eager, however, to read Desani's appropriation of Joyce as a case of simple unilinear influence. As Peter Goers has argued, the "detonative opaqueness" of *Hatterr* is hardly a wholly reverent tribute to the art of James Joyce in the sense of being merely imitative, as so many commentators have suggested (30). Rather, "Desani mocks Joyce, as when H. Hatterr himself claims, 'The cad is so convincing on the side of detail'" (Goers 30), or in several lengthy passages scattered throughout *Hatterr* that seem both consciously and parodically to invoke the verbose hyperprecision of the catechistic style of the "Ithaca" episode of *Ulysses*. At one point, Hatterr secures employment at a "yellow to the core! Indian-owned weekly" as a writer of "sundry ads and manufactured testimonials for their regular advertisers' poison-plus-water patent medicines" (229), a position that both reinforces the numerous parallels between Hatterr and Leopold Bloom and serves to underscore the stylistic *gesture* to Joyce that Desani makes in the preceding paragraphs.

But given this point of intersection, the question remains: what are we to make of these ambivalent half-mocking, half-reverent allusions to Joyce? How is one to characterize the attitude and relationship of *Hatterr* to *Ulysses*, for if the former is a mockery of the latter, to what purpose? Their similarities are obvious and well-documented and have been so since *Hatterr's* initial publication. Indeed, both are products of the ambivalent exilic imagination bent toward a subjugated homeland in the moment of its official liberation, and their stylistic symmetries hardly need to be rehearsed in detail here. In his unique investigation of the transcultural dynamics between the two novels in one of the very few critical readings of Desani in recent years, Srinivas Aravamudan characterizes him as more cynical, iconoclastic, and in fact *modernist* than Joyce himself, claiming that "Joyce's high modernist epic, itself a mock-epic, is raised by Desani to the third degree: *Hatterr* is a mock-Joycean novel and hence a mock-mock-epic" (113). Aravamudan justifies this claim through an analysis of the treatment of religion, specifically of Theosophy and Eastern spiritualism, in the two novels, arguing that while Joyce expertly parodies the Theosophical movement as it

was utilized by Irish nationalism, he ultimately embraces (if not overtly advocates) a syncretism that is itself derived from the same logic that informs Theosophy through its thorough incorporation of an essentialized Eastern culture. Aravamudan writes,

In contrast, Desani's exposé of Eastern spiritualism as a sham implies a generalized disculturation. Religious education, of the Eastern variety, is the target of Desani's novel as mumbo-jumbo, or muddle, and the spiritual syncretism of Theosophy would just be a more attenuated variety. In his turn, Desani is all iconoclast. (99)

It is ironic that while Joyce (though cited here with Theosophical syncretism) has not suffered the charge of derivativeness, Desani (a more fully heterodox modernist) is typically introduced with equal parts praise and reproach "under the sign of a 'Joycean' acculturation" and is thus dismissed as a gifted imitator writing babu literature (Aravamudan 99).

If we broaden slightly the scope of Aravamudan's discussion to include the domain of the ascendant nationalist culture confronted in each work, we gain a clearer idea of why Desani finds it necessary to both identify himself under the powerful imprimatur of Joyce and, simultaneously, to distance himself from it. If one accepts Aravamudan's contention that Joyce appeals (however partially or indirectly) to a brand of cultural syncretism, then Desani is certainly "making good on the unkept promise of modernist iconoclasm made by an earlier Joyce" (98). Desani recognizes more fully the oppressive potential of a syncretism implemented by an omnivorous acculturation—and all the more acutely as he is a member of the very culture being consumed in Joyce's model. Thus, unlike Joyce, who seems to hold out hope for some reconciling dialogue between Eastern spiritualism and Irish nationalism, Desani seeks to expose the hidden mechanisms of power (imperial and nationalist) operating within such cultural constructions as the "spiritual East." In this sense, Desani is more Joycean than Joyce himself, appropriating the latter's iconoclastic stance while critically revealing its crucial blind spot.

What Desani recognizes in Joyce's own re-authoring of Rabelais, Homer, Dante, and others to suit a modernizing social context is his

necessary critical engagement with colonialism, expanding capitalism, and anti-colonial nationalism. Desani's acute sensitivity to Ireland's plight can be glimpsed in Hatterr's near compulsive habit of referring any power inequity to the Irish colonial situation. Hence, whenever he is fired, he is said to have received an "Irish promotion" (65) and later laments that the Army Hygiene Contractor exploits him "enough to turn [him] Irish!" (198). Emphasizing this point of similarity with Joyce, Desani responds to the call issued by *Ulysses* not through some fanciful stylistic caricature or mere adaptation but through a thorough confrontation with some of the exemplar novel's oversights.

It is both through re-writing Joyce and writing beyond him that Desani articulates a gestural critique of Indian nationalism's practice of cultural compartmentalization. This gestural mediation (via parody) between the worlds of the abstract and the material, which Burns identifies in Joyce, has particularly heightened relevance in *All About H. Hatterr*, where the material and spiritual spheres constructed by Indian nationalist discourse clash and expose one another's *constructedness* in highly illuminating and comic ways.

Our first hint that there is considerably more to *All About H. Hatterr* than Joycean whole language or Babu linguistic hijinks is contained in the first of two *Warnings!* with which the book opens:

'Melodramatic *gestures* against public security are a common form of self-expression in the East. For instance, an Indian peasant, whose house has been burgled, will lay a tree across a railway line, hoping to derail a goods train, just to show his opinion of life. And the Magistrates are far more understanding. . .' *Anglo Indian writer* (1)

That *Hatterr* concerns itself with the social realities of colonial and post-colonial India is thus revealed (albeit circumspectly) from the opening page. In fact, Molly Ramanujan instructively reads this epigraphic warning as a "miniature replica of the novel itself" (51). One might read past the calculated understatement of the anonymous Anglo-Indian writer to surmise that the violent gesture of the peasant is in reaction not to the burglary of a single home but to the systemic "burglary" of

all India via colonial occupation. Thus, his spectacular act of violence is not simply a matter of randomly or carelessly expressing his personal discontent but is conceivable as a carefully measured and executed guerilla attack upon a crucial locus of circulation within the network of colonial commerce. This point is made particularly clear if one recalls that the derailing of trains was a common anti-colonial gesture in that the East India Company oversaw the construction of India's first railways for purposes of trade and, later, overt colonial domination.

Following this distorted account of subversive Indian violence, Hatterr recounts a comical meeting with an Indian literary agent in which he identifies his present work with the actions of the Indian peasant:

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

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

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

Author (to Indian middle-man): Sir, I identify it a novel. Sir, itemize it accordingly. (1, my emphasis)

Both acts are thus carefully conceived political *gestures*. As the literary agent (note Desani's play on the notion of agency) informs him, however, gestures are not in demand in the middle-class Indian market (comprised of those who would be reading the most novels and who are imaginatively constructing a nation for themselves), in which all elements must be scrupulously itemized and calculated. There is no room in this world of essentializing colonials and essentializing nationalists for the unruly hybridity that Hatterr represents or for his parodic political gesturing, which, as we shall see, takes aim at the excesses of Indian nationalism as much as at those of British colonialism.

Partha Chatterjee's influential discussion of Indian nationalism's division of culture into discreet material and spiritual domains helps to illuminate this aspect of Desani's work:

By my reading, anticolonial nationalism creates its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society well before it begins its political battle with imperial power. It does this by dividing the world of social institutions and practices into two domains--the material and the spiritual. The material is the domain of the "outside," of the economy and of statecraft, of science and technology, a domain where the West had proved its superiority and the East had succumbed. . . . The spiritual, on the other hand, is an "inner" domain bearing the "essential" marks of cultural identity. (6)

Primarily, anti-colonial nationalism declared as within its spiritual domain every conspicuous marker of Indian cultural identity from language and religion to the domestic provenance of the household. Of course, the designation of a spiritual cultural character, of an irrational Other to the West's post-enlightenment Reason, relies as much upon Orientalist stereotypes and essentialisms as does its putative opponent. By first exposing and then radically complicating these essentialisms, Desani offers a multi-faceted critique of Indian anti-colonial nationalism that is not merely a denunciation of its derivation from a Western model but is also what Rushdie calls a "stereoscopic vision . . . in place of 'whole sight'" (19). This critique is three-pronged, exploring and problematizing the "spiritual" and exclusively Indian cultural domains of religion, domesticity, and femininity.

The novel devotes most of its energies to the deconstruction of the religious cultural sphere. Hatterr, we learn, is born "fifty-fifty of the species," his mother being from the Malay Peninsula, his father from Scotland. Fleeing the English Missionary Society, by which he is adopted after the untimely death of his father (his mother's whereabouts is a mystery), Hatterr attempts to make it on his own in India and, as he writes, "I went completely Indian to *an extent few pure non-Indian blood sahib fellers have done*" (33). By granting intimate access to his wife to a fellow member, Hatterr is later able to regain some level of sahib respectability by joining an exclusive club for sahibs and passing himself off as an Englishman. This respectability is jeopardized, however, when a *dhobin* (washerwoman) to whom Hatterr owes money for serv-

ices rendered offers to remit his bill in exchange for sex. When Hatterr refuses her advances, the dhobin takes her case before the members of the club, who discover that he (not unlike the rest of the membership) also owes money for drinks. Dismissed from the club, Hatterr decides once again to embrace his Eastern heritage: "To hell with the sahibs! Not an anna-piece for the drink chits! Not a ruddy chip! Damme, I will go Indian! Live like you fellers, your neighborhood, and no dam' fears!" (47). Purely by virtue of his being thrown out of the Sahib Club, he is given a job as a suburban reporter for the *Bazaar*, a local paper, and his very first assignment is to interview the Sage of the Wilderness, author of a famed commentary on Panini's Sanskrit Grammar and currently a devotee of severe asceticism and matters otherworldly.

Intoxicated both by drink and the holy vision of the slim, ash-covered figure of the sage, Hatterr is asked to supply funds for a feast and later persuaded to remove his clothes and don a dirty railway towel before being unceremoniously thrown out of the sage's hut. Having no money, Hatterr decides to recoup his loss by covering himself in ash and begging his way back to the newspaper office. Fired from his job, Hatterr then returns to the sage to find out why his clothes were taken. His persistence is rewarded when the sage takes him into his confidence by revealing the secret of his austerities. He and his brother (the disciple) are revealed as second-hand clothes dealers who, struggling to make ends meet, devise the method of impersonating holy men to reduce costs and improve profits. As it turns out, the sage is not even the celebrated author of the Panini commentary but merely stumbled across the exercise book among some trash and republished it as his own. This encounter leads Hatterr to make one of the central observations of the novel:

I assess the world is made up of two contrasting kinds: the Hitters (fellers who hit others without scruple or reserve), and the ruddy crabs, at the other end of the line. And there are two sorts of contrasting ruddy crabs. The first sort, after hitting below the belt, behaves like a cat who has swallowed a poisoned rat, bouncing like hell to cough out the stuff, restore internal order and tranquillity, and turning Hitter, *never* allows the same thing to happen again. The second-class ruddy crab

bears up, does not hit back, and having gotten a kick on the bottom, hangs about, cadging, complaining, quoting fate, tradition, scripture, invoking divine aid: just expecting compensation—sympathy, money, tit bits, *anything!* (60)

Trying to determine to which of these classifications he belongs, Hatterr notes that the next time he sees an “intellectual sahib feller,” his first desire is to exact some kind of violent retribution, which, as he writes, “satisfies the fellers who have had a mean deal from life,” recalling the anonymous peasant’s own retributive derailing of the train at the novel’s opening (61).

As many things as there are to discuss in this very rich episode, I begin with one of the least obvious, the near throwaway mentioning of Panini’s grammar. Panini is recognized as the grammarian who, around 400 or so BC, first codified and systematized a Sanskritic grammar in the *Astadhyayi* (sometimes called the *Astaka*) (Cardoni 142). In Hindu nationalist songs such as “Ekaatmaata Stotra,” he is venerated alongside such legendary figures as Arjun the archer, Vyas (compiler of the Vedas), Valmiki (reputed author of the *Ramayana*), and several kings, sages, musicians, and poets from Indian (specifically Hindu) history. Panini’s appearance in a novelistic critique of Indian nationalism is therefore hardly incidental. Indeed, the nationalization of Sanskrit was, during the years of *Hatterr*’s composition, a major topic of socio-political interest throughout India.

Although the Sanskrit Commission would not be formed until 1956, when it made its official recommendations that the language be recognized as India’s national tongue, it was certainly not the first such proponent of India’s Sanskritization (Ramaswamy 347). By 1949, for example, the Constituent Assembly (1946–49) had already reviewed and rejected several proposals that would institute Sanskrit as the official language of India over the other major candidate (and eventual winner), Hindi (Ramaswamy 349). It was argued that, unlike the provincial Hindi, the Sanskritic language was coextensive with India itself and would thus not exclude any member of the nation’s heterogeneous communities. Such a claim, however, required a major revision of popular assumptions about the language. Known chiefly as the arcane tongue of the Brahman

priestly caste, Sanskrit did not seem to fit the democratic label being assigned to it. To counter the persistent aura of elitism surrounding the language, supporters argued that it was precisely Sanskrit's notorious difficulty and unfamiliarity to the Indian masses that made it the perfect national language. As Naziruddin Ahmad put it during an assembly, "I offer you a language which is the grandest and the greatest, and it is impartially difficult, equally difficult for all to learn" (qtd. in Ramaswamy 354-5). Thus, it is Sanskrit's relative unfamiliarity, claims its supporters, which allows it to elude accusations of provincial elitism being brought against other major candidates like Bengali, Marathi, or Tamil.

Sanskrit's ties to Indian nationalism, however, run deeper than its being merely a losing contender for the national tongue. As Sumathi Ramaswamy notes,

First, and most crucially, the Constitution, even while identifying Hindi as the official language of India, clearly names Sanskrit the primary source from which it should draw upon to enrich itself and develop a vocabulary. Such a linking of Sanskrit to the official language is perhaps not surprising, for at least since the late eighteenth century, it had been identified by numerous colonial administrators as the "fountainhead" and "reservoir" of not just Hindi, but all languages of "Hindu" India. Further, from the 1880s on, the supporters of Hindi had launched a sustained program of Sanskritizing Hindi, in their attempts to distance the language from its Persian-Urdu (read: "Muslim") past. (358)

In this way, Hindu nationalism could appropriate to and for itself that quintessentially *Indian* cultural signifier, what the Sanskrit Commission would, in 1956, call "the Supreme Unifier," the "Great Unifying Force" (Ramaswamy 344). Furthermore, it was argued that "[t]he Indian people and the Indian civilization were born . . . in the lap of Sanskrit"; Sanskrit is "in our blood" and "the breath of our nostrils and the light in our eyes"; it is called the "main thread which runs through the entire fabric of the cultural life of an Indian" (qtd. in Ramaswamy 344-5). The Sanskritization of Hindi thus helped to nationalize, through appeals to

a clearly Orientalist essentialism, the interests of a mandarin Hindu culture and to revise the ancient esoteric language as a democratic voice of the masses. Ramaswamy writes that

The spiritual, cultural and moral work of regeneration with which Hinduism had been entrusted in an earlier period, was now thrust upon language, and upon one language in particular, Sanskrit. In that process, the overt connections of the language with Hinduism were severed, even as the content and message of that religion were selectively dredged up to provide the moral and emotional moorings for a nation that was adrift but could hopefully be anchored down by Sanskrit. (374)

The importance of Sanskrit to the nationalist project cannot be over-emphasized, and the popular rediscovery of such important works as Panini's grammar were invaluable in promoting the language to a nascent national culture. By having the Sage of the Wilderness pose as both a Hindu holy man and the author of a distinguished commentary on Panini's grammar, Desani thereby invokes and simultaneously satirizes two crucial elements of the nationalist narrative at the very moment of their enthronement as Indian culture.

But there are yet other elements in this scene that resonate with the historical moments of its composition. One should not, for instance, overlook the fact that these men, posing as wisdom-spouting gurus, are involved in the second-hand clothing business, initially peddling imported European overcoats before establishing the charade that would make them wealthy. In the nationalist movement (inasmuch as it remained under Gandhi's gradually waning influence), this practice is not only morally questionable but possibly interpretable as indirectly treasonous as well; for one of the major thrusts of Gandhi's campaign of *khadi* was a liberation from British capitalism through a systematic rejection of British-manufactured clothing. Gandhi envisioned *khadi*, which ideally required every Indian regardless of rank or social standing to spin a certain number of hours each day for personal use, as the central economic foundation for an independent India. Public demonstrations were organized at which Indians could come and dispose

of European-manufactured clothing in enormous community bonfires, and simple homespun dress was universally adopted as the national uniform, just as the iconic spinning wheel became the national symbol of a free India. It is perhaps for his subversion of the principle of *khadi*, then, as much as for his disingenuous posing as a holy man and learned author that Hatterr declares him a “Disgrace to *mahatmas*,” obliquely invoking the man with whom that title is most enduringly synonymous.

It is in fact with a thinly veiled reference to Gandhism that the chapter concludes, for the second-class ruddy crab, who refuses to hit back but merely “hangs about, cadging, complaining, quoting fate, tradition, scripture, invoking divine aid,” is obviously a caricatured proponent of Gandhi’s twin anti-colonial platforms of *Satyagraha* (the force of love and truth) and *Ahimsa* (non-violence). Against Gandhi’s non-violent non-cooperation Hatterr sets a system of retributive compensation, though one executed entirely *without malice*, which seems closer to Fanon than to Gandhi. Thus, Hatterr identifies himself with the first class of ruddy crabs, which, once hit, turn hitter and never allow themselves to be hit again. And while I am not interested here in sketching out a fully coherent picture of Desani’s or even Hatterr’s own political convictions in this regard (to whatever extent that is made possible by the novel), it is important to note that Desani is clearly and unapologetically confronting these sensitive issues of Indian nationalist culture at the moment of its ascendancy. Moreover, the implicit appeals here to a belief in the efficacy of revolutionary social transformation marks Desani (or at the very least Hatterr) as an inveterate modernist.

Desani’s primary target in *Hatterr* is not restricted to Gandhism alone but, as I have already suggested, includes all aspects of Indian nationalism’s division of the world into discrete material and immaterial spheres. The Sage of the Wilderness is but one of several such sham holy men who call into question this easy compartmentalization, not least of which is our protagonist himself. In the first of many such impersonations, Hatterr, though enraged at being taken advantage of by these conmen, shows himself equally adept at manipulating the spiritual realm when he smears himself with ash in order to return unmolested to the newspaper office. And the only reason that he does not take material

advantage of his disguise at this point, we learn, is that, clad only in an oily railway cloth, he has no pockets in which to store his earnings: "As I was supposed to be an absolute recluse, not even possessing a pocket, I could not help myself, though I was clinch-keen on making a spot of easy ready by having a go at a little harmless beggin myself!" (55).

Later, following an incident in Mysore in which Hatterr charitably borrows money from a starving money-lender, he receives a letter from the lender's attorney, one V.K. Nighanteesrimahalingham Anoopam-srimaharathanam Chety-Chety, demanding immediate payment of the borrowed sum, plus interest. Moreover, Chety-Chety threatens further legal action resulting from Hatterr's impersonation of a knight, not to mention an O.M., D.D., M.D., and D.C.I., all titles whimsically granted to himself in his signing of the contract with the money-lender. In order to evade his litigious pursuers, Hatterr decides to renounce the material world and take again to the spiritual. Indicating the ease with which this transition can be accomplished in India, he observes,

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)

Soon meeting upon a similarly garbed wanderer out in the bush, Hatterr strikes up a conversation in what he claims to be the venerable style of holy men:

“O too-early-in-life wearer of the honoured loin-cloth,” I asked, quo vadis like, “whither goest?”

“Wherefore, fellow mendicant,” he replied gravely, “thou speakest to a white-washed eagle whose surpassingly beautiful beak is mounted with gold-plate and studded with diamonds and pearls of the finest water?” (120)

Upon hearing this needlessly ornate (and decidedly English) rhetorical display, Hatterr recognizes the young man as a fellow sham artist in a self-reflexively parodic invocation of Desani himself:

The trump card of us Balaamite fellers is the mumbo-jumbo talk: the priestcraft obscurantisms and subtlety: (. . . *Wherefore, pious brethren, by confessing I lie, yoiks! I tell the truth*, sort of topholy trumpeting-it, by Pharisee G.V. Desani: see the feller’s tract *All About* . . . , publisher, the same publishing company): a language deliberately designed to mystify the majority, tempt ‘em to start guessing, and interpreting our real drift, and allegory, what the hell we mean. . . . (120)

The two then engage one another in a ridiculously complex and arcane exchange of insults, after which they decide to pool their resources in an effort to extract as much lucre from local believers as possible and to overcome their chief competition, Hiranamek Mukti, or the Cardinal of Diamonds and Rubies. Celebrated by the locals for their expulsion of the “corrupt” holy man, Hatterr’s partner, “Always-Happy XX, *i.e.*, the Archbishop Walrus of Behar” (121), decides to cash in on their newly acquired notoriety by staging another miracle. Claiming that he has cured Hatterr from “extreme satyriasis-nymphomania,” Always-Happy declares that Hatterr has gone so far as to perform the *last sadhana*. Unaware what this might mean, but impressed by the sound of it, Hatterr is horrified when Bannerji, who is now filled with new reverence for Hatterr’s devout spiritualism, tells him of the method whereby one accepts the last sadhana: “They starve, and finally, as in the veterinary science, *destroy surgically* the organ whereby the sex instinct is satisfied. The method is the simple amputation or, alternatively, bruise-

ing and crushing of the stones” (148). Now suspecting that Always-Happy means publicly to castrate him for both the sensational spectacle and religious awe that it would arouse, Hatterr retreats into the material world, echoing his earlier sentiments regarding the primacy of the material over the spiritual: “This is the Twentieth Century! *Body*, man! Doctor the body, and everything’ll be okey-doke! Be alive! *Live!* Virility! *Vis vitalis!* This is the Medical Man’s Century” (95).

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 regard to subaltern agency itself.

Chatterjee suggests that one motivation for demarcating an exclusive spiritual realm was to protect the material interests of the emergent middle class and nationalist elite. Thus, women, lower classes, religious leaders, and so forth were trotted out as symbols of a *pure* Indian culture while they were simultaneously materially disenfranchised. Because the material world was supposedly one of Western dominance against which the fragility and purity of spiritual India must be protected, those who were designated as representative of the spiritual sphere were safely immured against the material world and, thus, against material agency. But in the India of Desani’s novel, it is precisely through (and under cover of) such social formations that those consigned to the spiritual realm surreptitiously attain material agency—not through a direct channel of influence or authority within the state’s bureaucratic apparatus, but through the material exploitation of the spiritual, thus calling into question the legitimacy of such divisions.

While the majority of the book focuses on Hatterr’s various encounters with fakirs, frauds, and charlatans of this sort, an important element

persistently overlooked in the relative dearth of criticism on the book is Desani's treatment of women and the way they figure into his gestural critique of Indian nationalist discourse. Chatterjee notes that the spiritual/material binary led eventually to a distinction between inner and outer realms of social space, the domains of *ghar* (home) and *bahir* (world). While the world was the space reserved for men, politics, and commerce, "[t]he home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world--and woman is its representation. And so one gets an identification of social roles by gender to correspond with the separation of the social space into ghar and bahir" (120).

We have already seen, in the person of the washerwoman, Desani's penchant for crafting women who question traditional gender stereotypes. But what may not be immediately obvious to the reader is that the character of the washerwoman is, in fact, a reference to a particularly nationalist stereotype against which the modern Indian woman is being partially defined. In attempting to delineate the character of the "new" woman of the Indian middle class, nationalist discourses distinguished not only between the new woman and the Memsahib—whom the former was in the very act of replacing—but also any number of lower-class women, from whom the new elite must distance themselves. Chatterjee writes that this

"new" woman was quite the reverse of the "common" woman, who was coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous, subjected to brutal physical oppression by males. Alongside the parody of the Westernized woman, this other construct is repeatedly emphasized in the literature of the nineteenth century through a host of lower-class female characters who make their appearance in the social milieu of the new middle class—maidservants, washer women, barbers, peddlers, procuresses, prostitutes. It was precisely this degenerate condition of women that nationalism claimed it would reform, and it was through these contrasts that the new woman of nationalist ideology was accorded a status of cultural superiority to the Westernized woman of the wealthy

parvenu families spawned by the colonial connection as well as to common women of the lower classes. (127)

It is, after all, precisely the dhobin's *coarseness*, her lewd directness, in essence, her lack of acceptable passive femininity that disturbs Hatterr and prompts him to reject her sexual advances. As he tells his friend, the ridiculously anglophilic Bannerjee, "I can't stand virilism in females," particularly when the female in question is "nearer sixty than fifty" (42–3). But however comical she might appear in her amorous pursuit of Hatterr, it is she, paradoxically, who wields the power (albeit indirectly) to eject him from his exclusive Sahib Club, reversing momentarily the social hierarchy in which she is perpetually subordinated. And it is only through a careful exploitation of her abject social position, her play upon the obligatory pity and charity of the sahibs, that she achieves Hatterr's ignominious expulsion from that very class.

But we also find in *Hatterr* a representative of the opposite (though no less ridiculed) end of the female social spectrum, the Memsahib, in the person of Hatterr's wife, referred to only, and with dubious affection, as the Kiss-curl. Though most likely an Anglo-Indian like Hatterr, the Kiss-curl, characterized as superficial, vain, intolerant, promiscuous, and often belligerent, functions effectively as Indian nationalism's caricatured Memsahib, unconcerned with the domestic weal and perfectly willing to walk out on Hatterr when his social status dips below what is expected of a sahib, which is often. We know, for instance, that she has no qualms about carrying on an affair with another member of the sahib club if it means securing Hatterr's admittance and thereby raising his (and thus her own) social standing. This venal jockeying for social respectability is revealed in one instance when Hatterr receives yet another "Irish promotion," this time at his job as a renovator of antique furniture, and finds that his wife has immediately left him, as he proclaims in inimitable Hatterrese: "Hail to the gods in the bush, and those without! The Kiss-curl has absquatulated. C'est la guerre!" (65).

It is, in fact, a series of efforts to regain some measure of social standing with which to win back his wife that motivates the novel and thus propels Hatterr's many excursions into the world of sham spiritualism.

Hatterr's laughably symbolic encounter with a lion, for instance, is the direct result of Bannerji's scheming both to divert Hatterr's mind from his wife's departure and to restore his reputation in order to win her back. Likewise, Hatterr's attempts to have conferred upon himself the title of *Sangita Kala Sagara* (roughly the equivalent of the O.B.E.), an honorary musical degree, are chiefly for the benefit of the Kiss-curl, who interrupts the ceremony by her return, her lover on her arm, and pointedly dismisses Hatterr and his guests:

Before humblest apologies can be made, and before I can beg that the proceedings should terminate forthwith, with conferring of the degree, and without further ado, the devil's own is afoot and about.

She is in the house, on the premises, burning, and blistering, most likely viewing her precious furniture being laundered in the rain.

Too soon, she returns to the drawing room. . .

She enters, wham, plus the six-bore: *and* the steel clip over-size cartridge belt!

And she threatens to shoot all present and promises to consign the cadavers to the Ganges! (248)

Left to seek shelter from the rain in a cowshed, Hatterr, hungry and once more the cuckold, peers into the French window at the feast his wife has laid out for her friends, lamenting to himself,

Damme, having been made a laughing stock in my own house and neighborhood, and having had my guests nearly machine-gunned, I couldn't very well show off!

In the process, I lamento muito, poor Bannerji lost faith in a member of the memsahib community. Damme, a tragedy and a shame: for the feller had arranged the honorary degree more for her sake than mine. (249–50)

Despite her symbolic status as Memsahib, however, the Kiss-curl never suffers the indignities of those in the popular plays written by Michael Madhussudan Dutt, Dinabandhu Mitra, Jyotirindranath

Tagore, Upendranath Das, and Amritalal Bose and other founders of the modern Indian theater, in which those women associated with or aspiring to the elite Westernized society brought about by colonial administration and trade were rendered into grotesque caricatures for the humor and (more centrally) the moral edification and social instruction of the audience (Chatterjee 122). In fact, the Kiss-curl always comes out on top, and it is poor Hatterr who is made to suffer all manner of indignities and hardships in his ill-fated efforts to please her. Thus, again we find a nationalist stereotype that refuses to accept the role defined for her by nationalist discourse.

Noticeably absent in this narrative, of course, is the central figure against which these two caricatures of Indian womanhood (the Memsahib and the dhobin) are characteristically balanced, that of the modern Indian woman celebrated in nationalist narratives, educated, liberated, yet dedicated fully to the care of the domestic space. Her absence in *Hatterr* (not in itself seemingly significant) is amplified by the appearance and unconventional appearance of those female characters who traditionally serve as her foils in nationalist fictions. By offering the foils center stage and erasing the normative main character of this nationalist morality tale, Desani thus issues a rather provocative statement about the reality of the modern Indian woman in postcolonial India: she, like the spiritual realm with which she is so closely identified, does not exist as such.

But Desani's critique does not rely merely upon cryptic invocations of nationalist stereotypes. He also addresses these issues of materiality and spirituality in a more philosophical (though no less indirect) manner. One of the best examples of this is found in Hatterr's discussion with his friend Bannerji regarding maps. Hatterr claims that some years prior he had developed a passionate interest in maps, "a literal mapomania!" (195). Scolded by Bannerji for spending his money on maps rather than on daily nourishment, Hatterr responds that one cannot do without maps, arguing that Stanley, "Feller of the Royal Geographical," would never have been found by Livingstone had Africa not been sufficiently mapped. The conversation then runs as follows, Bannerji replying that,

'Maps are merely symbolic of the material. They are the things of the spirit. True, you are spiritually strong. But, with all due respect to the spiritual P&Q, the material needs feeding as well.'

'Or vice versa, old feller, or vice versa! What's the dam' use of the material P&Q, when the spiritual is ill at ease?' (195)

While Desani does not further develop this conversation into anything resembling an overt critique, all the elements for such a critique are here assembled: colonialism, mapping, the spiritual, and the material, all targets of Desani's gestural politics elsewhere in the novel. And despite Hatterr's defense of the spirit here, we soon learn that his chief reason for (and defense of) his love of maps, which he has equated with the spiritual domain, is the fact that he believes himself to have discovered in a map of the Western Ghats the hidden trove of Mogul treasure stolen by Shivaji and the Marhatta (or Maratha) army during their raids against the Mogul Empire in the eighteenth century. Not surprisingly, Hatterr's plan is to curtail expenses on this secret expedition by traveling as a holy man: "I have thought of everything. And I am not going to spend a single capital anna if I can help it. I would go to the Ghats as a *sanyasi*, a fakir, a naked wandering minstrel. The population would feed me and what is more important nobody would suspect my real drift" (197). Whereas only a few paragraphs earlier, Hatterr oddly disavows his former preference for the material by praising the spiritual, the latter's superiority extends only so far as it can be surreptitiously exploited for material benefit.

Thus, we arrive at *Hatterr's* key observation, "the aphorism of all aphorisms, the doctrine of all doctrines, the rune of all runes, the Hinduism of all the Hinduism, the *mantra*-supreme": "*Abscond from charlatans and deceivers as thou wouldst from venomous snakes*" (252). After hearing this advice from the final sage, the Sage of All-India, Hatterr absconds that very night: "The reader will have noticed that I disobeyed all the 6 instructions given me by my preceptors, the Sages of *Calcutta*, *Rangoon* (now resident in India), *Madras*, *Bombay*, *Delhi* and *Mogalsarai-Varanasi*. But I posthaste obeyed the 7th Instruction *All-India* gave me"

(252). It is ironic, of course, that Hatterr should flee from charlatans and frauds, being such an exemplary one himself. However, as I have suggested through reference to Desani's veiled politico-historical allusions, this advice seems particularly directed at the populace of the newly independent India, whose national identity, constructed in opposition to that of its colonial counterpart, rests on a foundation of the kind of charlatanry and false essentialism that Desani comically exposes throughout *All About H. Hatterr*.

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