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## Modernist Elements in G. V. Desani's *All about H. Hatterr*

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### **Abstract:**

With his only novel *All About H. Hatterr*, G. V. Desani heralded (literary) modernism in Indian English Literature in his response to the rapidly changing world. In this autobiographical novel the author questions the institutions like religion, social identity, social order and colonial authority. All the characteristics of modernism: breaking away from the tradition, quest for identity, finding new ways to express man's position in the changing world, many experiments in the form, style and language, are to be found in *All About H. Hatterr*. Many aspects of modernism are depicted in this avant-garde text. Its versatile humour, absurdism, linguistic hybridity and inimitable style—had a great influence on the development of the modernist movement in Indian English Literature. *All About H. Hatterr* being the most relevant example of modernist novel in Indian English literature is best known for its engaging narrative style, mix of Indian and Western idioms and forms, use of unique language and by the author's concern with individual rather than external reality, G. V. Desani explored a different and playful resourceful of language which was the blend of Indian and Western techniques.

**Keywords:** Modernism, avant-garde, modernist technique, hybridity and individual reality.

### **Introduction:**

Modernism is a period from late 18<sup>th</sup> cen to early 20<sup>th</sup> cen which is marked by a change and growth in the human thinking. The interplay of theories and movements has brought more complexities into modern literature. Meanings of structures, literary forms and language were constantly questioned and no static meaning was accepted. Modernism meant to indicate how human knowledge was incomplete and limited. Isaac Newton, Darwin, Einstein and other scientists championed the belief that through science the world of space and time could be understood. Rene Descartes, Immanuel Kant, Neitsctze and other philosophers shaped it intellectually. Freudian and Lacanian psychological theories established a foundation of unconscious state of mind as a liberating force and source of social change and progress.

The winds of change blew across the whole world. Modernism in India came through Western leanings. A closer look into modernism may help us in reinterpreting it with newer perspectives.

We all know the fact that Indian English literature started as a literature of imitation. But gradually it acquired its own form, style and technique. At present it has its own identity. In tone, phrase, diction and imagery, Indian English literature is able to express the Indian sensibility and relevance. Literary historians locate the beginning of Indian modernity as back as 1890s. But modernism as such is a late arrival in the Indian context.

Modernity in literature is related with certain intrinsic qualities. During this phase of time focus was shifted from social to individual. Art became a revelation of inner conflicts in the form of stream of consciousness and soliloquies. Kafka, Camus, Sartre, Beckett, Joyce and Salinger were the most important models. There was a thematic shift from general (social and political) to solitude, alienation and loss of identity. This was also a period of experimentation and structural innovations. Fantasy, magic realism, surrealism, black humour and irony became the chief vehicles of expression.

### **Modern Perspectives in Indian English Literature:**

Obviously “modernism”, like other literary and critical concepts in Indian English is derived from Western models. But later on it developed and made adequate and evaluating features expressed the unique nature of Indian sensibility. Modernity in the Indian literature was a set of tendencies which explored the complexities of feelings, emotions and thoughts, rethinking of one's conditions, perceptions and order of experience in colonial rule. Modernism for us was the defiance of the traditional outlook towards literature as a tool of social change or a contrast with romanticism and an initiation of a new beginning with all new themes, style, structure and approach. Modernist poets and novelists explored and experimented with lots of innovative techniques.

Indian English Literature has edged out from everyday consciousness and the modern thought that seemed very important and crucial to the evolution of modern Indian identity. Modernity is a composite influence with its tremendous impact on the Indian English Fiction. British novelists: James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence, Aldous Huxley, E. M. Forster; American novelists: William Faulkner, Earnest Hemingway; Sigmund Freud's exploration of conscious and subconscious, moulded thoroughly the thematic and stylistic concept, giving way to a revolutionary experimentations and innovations in all possible fields.

In R. K. Narayan we find the regional idioms (kannada). In his *The Guide* (1958), he makes use of all the devices of the “stream of conscious” novel with memories, flashbacks and longings. Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, Manohar Malagoankar's *Bend in Ganges*, Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, Chaman Nahal's *Azaadi*, Bhabhani Bhattacharya's *He Who Rides the Tiger* are called modern classics because they express political realism, personal relationships as well as the local, regional and universal spaces. The modern

novelists explored three dimensions: metaphysical, sociological and psychological. The modern novel in its theme and style experimented and brought all the innovations and was trying to establish anxiously the world torn between ‘within’ and ‘without’ and of different stature than the earlier novels and novelists.

One can identify two categories of writers in Indian English fiction. First writers like R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Anita Desai, Ahmed Ali, Khushwant Singh who wish to dilate the English language so that it can creatively accommodate Indian experiences and modes of feelings. The language they use is extended and expanded but structural change is made. Second, writers like Raja Rao, G. V. Desani, Salman Rushdie are involved in process of nativization of English Language. In them we notice a more conscious linguistic experiment at several levels. This kind of decolonization of language goes hand in hand with the desire to make it a more penetrating tool of artistic expression.

The objective of this paper is to investigate how the novelist G. V. Desani uses modernist elements and English language as his chosen instruments of communication so as to capture the deep structures and lineaments of national culture and make English a more authentic vehicle of expression of sensibility and the consciousness of the people.

### **G. V. Desani’s All About H. Hatterr :**

All About H. Hatterr is a novel by G. V. Desani which chronicles the adventures of an Anglo-Malaya man who calls himself, Hindustaniwallah Hatterr. He is in search of wisdom and enlightenment. The novel deals with his search for the self. He visits seven cities and consults seven sages, each of whom has specialized in a different aspect of “living”. The novel is a comic extravaganza. The character of Hatterr is presented in a comic vein. The charm, vitality and the linguistic humour created a unique hero with a dazzling and puzzling prose. But Anthony Burgess writes in his introduction to the novel that, it is the language that makes the book. It is not pure English, it is like Shakespeare, Joyce, and Kipling, gloriously impure. The novel is full of wonderful textual fun and games. Desani’s magic has created an entirely new kind of voice through unique phrasing and rhythm. We find a layered and complex text that makes a critique of both colonial India and British empire using picaresque, pseudo-philosophical treatises, mimicry and a magnificent hybrid language. The pyrotechnics of the English language has certainly succeeded in making it a special lingo. It is this language, sometimes verbal and sometimes non-verbal even sometimes a gesture that contributed to the making of the Indian English in the hands of an Indian. An attempt to realize and understand how brilliantly English language can be moulded often puzzles us. According to Salman Rushdie, “the strength of Indian English Language is the “chutney-fication” of it. It is this language that communicates what it does not convey. There is a great flexibility and plasticity of the style that is rendered by the novelist. We can observe Desani’s command over English language to enact his philosophy of

life in an authentic way. The blend of humourous, grotesque and serious has given a unique tone to express Hatterr's philosophy of life. To quote an example, " Like a jack in the box, this feller Jenkins( his dog) sprang up from nowhere, became airworthy and bounced up, skywards!

It is regarded as one of the modern classics in Indian English literature. The meaning of All About H. Hatterr is found in the much praised structure of the novel. The comparison with the Joyce's *Ulysses* is intended to be a compliment. All About H. Hatterr is in seven chapters. Critics have observed that the novel resembles Forster's *A Passage to India* because this novel also deals with the metaphysical elements. Though All About H.Hatterr is comic prose we can readily consider it as a philosophical fiction. K.R.S Iyengar observes, " it is a journey and struggle, a movement from innocence to experience, a growth in consciousness, education in the large school of life; it is in this formula many an epic, many a novel is specially structured and G. V. Desani's novel belongs to this class". Hatterr is a hero not because he has heroic qualities or achieved great things in his life but he because he has lost the outer world to gain the experience of inner world. The novel has no story to narrate. The unquenchable thirst of Hatterr makes him to realize the wisdom of life. The Seven sages and the Seven cities Hatterr visits help him to know the Truth of life.

The book deals with two kinds of issues. The first kind concerns all men and is about the business of living one's life. This issue is dealt with both at the practical and the more abstract philosophic plane. The second kind of issue is a matter of inter-cultural identity that every educated Indian faces that is we are men of two cultures, Indian and European or Eastern and Western. It is concerned with the problem of life-style and language. The two kinds of issues are interconnected and occur in an inter-linked form. Hatterr plays with the idea that the world around him is an ideal and happy place. When he meets the absurd everywhere, he asks, Why bite one another now? He feels that mankind can be better. Every bitter experience makes him makes him realize the fact that there is no poetic justice and all dualisms exist in each and everything of human life.

The novel deals with the involvement of Indians with the sages and mystics of all hues. Desani ridicules every Indians who seems concerned with evolving into superior being and is forever seeking a Guru the one who is wiser than himself and who can answer all his questions and lead him to the path of self- realization. That is why holy-men flourish in India in such numbers. In some way Desani's novel is a comment on this aspect of Indian existence.

Desani calls this book a gesture. He knew that melodramatic gestures are quite common in India. For instance, if a peasant's house has been burgled, he may attempt to derail a train by laying a tree across a railway line. In our present time also we can see such gestures frequently: angry students pelting stones at buildings, protesters blocking the traffic, frustrated commuters burning the buses etc. all these gestures are acts of ventilation. We could assume that All About H.

Hatterr is also a gesture in some sense and the meaning of the novel is in a measure the meaning behind these gestures. Christy L. Burns offers a reading of the 'art of gesture'. She argues that the art of gesture provide a way of uniting the abstract and the physical, the material and the immaterial, progressively associating the problems of limits of representation and its relation to more general aspects of the society. Hatterr made grand fun of all manner of social structure, status, religious instruction and the language. A recent comment pointed out that until Hatterr was published in 1948 in London, the Western literary world had doubts about the ability of the non-English authors regarding complete mastery over the language. But Desani's novel written in the model of Joyce's *Ulysses*, brought out an exotic, polyglotic, supernational novel that reinvigorated the native tongue.

H. Hatterr describes himself as "biologically fifty-fifty of the species". The language he uses is a mixture of English vocabulary and Indian syntax. Ethnically mixed Hatterr and his linguistically mixed speech are paradigms of the Western educated Indian whose cultural roots are confused and whose hybrid language is a freak. The culture and language of being foreign origin take their toll and Desani's novel is a comment on this situation. For illustration we may consider Bannerji's speech and his attempts to adopt European ways. Certainly much of the humour in the novel comes from this. But it is not only the humour and laughter that is amazing also it is admirable the way they differ from each other while using such language. Desani makes their language alive and individual. The novel flaunts its various brands of English and challenges the users of correct English. This gives the novel a complexity which would be missing if we read it only as satire. While satirizing the men like Bannerji and others, the novelist also defies the ways of the British settlers, their clubs, their impractical clothes and their alien style of life.

The intercultural experience is not only projected as assertion or defiance but also offers for a critical analysis by the reader. Desani raises an issue that had been explored earlier, the Hindu attitude towards sex. The subject comes up in the novel in various forms. Bannerji's study of Freud and how he warns Hatterr about the dangers of libido. The sage of Rangoon commands his disciples to "extinguish the fires of desire". The advice is unrealistic in first place. More often when there is a lacking in the worldly pleasure, material goods and conveniences, people turn to spirituality. Desani comments on these complex reactions of the people through Hatterr. But a striking note is that this attack is not just one sided on the traditional Indian situation and attitudes. He comments on European sensibilities too. Though Hatterr and Bannerji come from different community and cultures, both agree on treating marriage as the normal state. This is naturally related to having a stable income and contented life. One of the important issues in the novel is economics and the family. Hatterr desires for a home, wife and children. But he was unfortunate that his aspirations of having a happy family could not be fulfilled. Hatterr spends his life time seeking wisdom. He did not find the jewels he was seeking but he found what he did not understand.



Hatterr in the course of seeking wisdom had to deal with various characters who are ever seeking innocent people to exploit. On various occasions he and other innocent beings are deceived, cheated and deprived of their possessions and belongings by sundry characters operating in different garbs. In this connection Hatterr's question is, why must one man exploit another? Whenever two individuals meet, why one must win and the other lose? Is nature unsocial in intent"? There is really no answer to Hatterr's question. The sense of meaninglessness in the form of contrast appeals us a lot. But Hatterr's intellectual and spiritual concerns are Indian, according to him, what might be improbable everywhere might be probable in India. The individual has to learn to look out for himself. He has to discover how to survive. The novel may be read as a satire on various evils that prevail in the society. But that is one level at which we can make an approach. But indeed it can be seen as much more than this. Desani did not merely write about the blindness of legal aspects, in this novel he exposes the swamis and gurus. But certainly, it is not all that. It is quite a bit more. The novelist succeeds in bringing attention to the neglected aspects of the self through Hatterr and Bannerjee. Molly Ramanujan views that in the novel, at the highest moment there is a complete merger of the anthropomorphic world with the philosophic all. It records the consciousness of the inner world and the outer world, body and soul, life and death, good and evil, mortal and immortal, finite and infinite, subjective and objective and so on".

Hatterr begins to discover how to survive and tries to invent Truth. However, the quest is difficult and it is only for the few, not the many. Others should try to live simply a good and ethical life. The key motifs of the novel can be interpreted as the exploration of dislocation, loneliness and the search for the meaning of life. The novel also offers an alternative to the English literary tradition portraying the absurdities of English society and culture. The language can be appropriated and eloquently employed to satirize the Master by the oppressor. Desani invented a mode full of comic, ironic and farcical which gave a significant scope for the enactment of absurdities of life while seeking the Truth.

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