

Indian Fiction in English
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Lecture - 26
All About H. Hatterr

Good morning everyone. Today we attempt to take a look at this rather obscure novel titled all about H. Hatterr.

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We did mention about this novel and the significance that it has in the history of Indian writing in English in general especially when we took a look at Rushdie's introduction to his Vintage Book of Indian Writing and there we also noticed how this novel all about H. Hatterr by G.V. Desani has come to play a significant role when we tell the story, tell the origins when we try to locate the starting points which influenced some of the important writers of Indian writing in English particularly Rushdie.

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How do we locate *Hatterr*?

- ✓ Sterne's inheritor of 'gloriously impure' English – like the English of Shakespeare, Joyce and Kipling
- ✓ Rushdie's predecessor

There are two ways in which we can locate a work such as *All About H. Hatterr*. The first one is to identify *H. Hatterr* as a Laurence Sterne's inheritor of gloriously impure English like the English of Shakespeare, Joyce and Kipling. It is a typical modernist tradition. This is also a way in which Desani's *Hatterr* gets located in the English literary tradition and this is how the work has been viewed until 1970s.

And this is how the work was viewed until the later 70s and 80s but what brought about a significant difference, a unique perspective to the understanding of *H. Hatterr* was the introduction written by Rushdie where he acknowledged *Hatterr* as one of his major influences. So there are two ways in which we can locate *Hatterr*, one is Sterne's inheritor of a very typical English literary tradition.

And secondly as Rushdie's predecessor, it is a second one that we are currently interested in as part of this course. We shall be looking at *H. Hatterr* and the implications and significance of this work as far as Rushdie and Indian writing in general is concerned. If you recall the discussions of the introduction written by Rushdie for his anthology this is what Rushdie had spoken about *Hatterr*.

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Rushdie on Hatterr

o "...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 the work of many of his successors." (Rushdie)

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 the work of many of his successors. So this is the tribute, this is the literary tribute that Rushdie pays to H. Hatterr is the major influence in producing a work such as *Midnight's Children*.

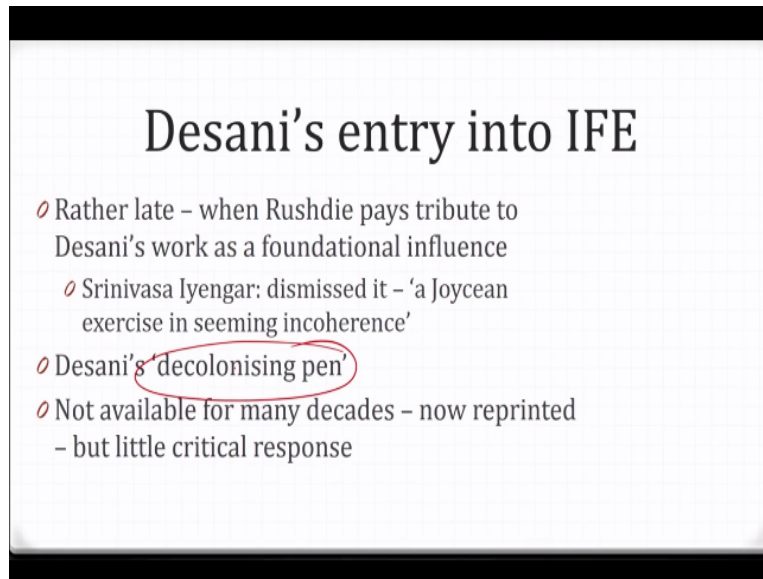
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o "The Orient, damme" (Desani 197)

o "Damme, This Is the Oriental Scene For You" (Rushdie)

Here I also cannot help noticing this connection in Desani's novel in page 197 which is also the fifth chapter of the work. He makes this remark *The Orient, damme* and it is a similar title that Rushdie incidentally uses for his 1997 essay, *Damme, This is the Oriental Scene For You*. It is another version of the same essay that we find as part of his introduction to the anthology aspect.

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Desani's entry into IFE

- Rather late – when Rushdie pays tribute to Desani's work as a foundational influence
- Srinivasa Iyengar: dismissed it – 'a Joycean exercise in seeming incoherence'
- Desani's decolonising pen
- Not available for many decades – now reprinted
– but little critical response

And Desani's entry into Indian Fiction in English, it is a very interesting, it is rather late entry that he makes into the oeuvre of Indian Fiction in English and Srinivasa Iyengar much before Rushdie had paid a tribute to Desani. Srinivasa Iyengar had dismissed Desani's *All About H. Hatterr* saying that it is a Joycean exercise in seeming incoherence.

And due to this and to various other reasons and because of the complicated publishing history that H. Hatterr has Indian literary tradition, Indian critical tradition had paid very little attention to Desani for a very long time. It is also significant to notice that after Rushdie Desani's decolonising pen is much talked about. It is foregrounded. Desani is able to lay a legitimate claim over this decolonizing pen that he used much earlier in the late 1940s.

This work was not available for many decades as some of you may know it. It has been reprinted recently, many reprints are available but however this has generated very little critical response and firstly it could be because of the difficult nature of the text. Secondly, it could also be about this inability to place Desani into any particular Indian literary tradition which is why most discussions on Desani begins by referring to the intervention that Rushdie made just like we have also done as part of this course.

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What did Rushdie do?

- o Rescued Hatterr from a delimited modernist reading
 - o "The novel's brilliance was ascribed to its formal elements only: content was divorced from it" (Gopal)
- o Helped foreground the political dimensions of story-telling
- o *Midnight's Children*: 'content was not just relevant to form but *determined* form'

So what did Rushdie do to H. Hatterr? Priyamvada Gopal is of the opinion that Rushdie rescued Hatterr from a delimited modernist reading which was a part of its dominant tradition for a long time. According to Gopal, I quoted the novel's brilliance was ascribed to its formal elements only. Content was divorced from it, so the dominant tendency was to read H. Hatterr as a typical modernist work.

And also to focus on the different ways in which language was being used playfully or how a new kind of form was being experimentally used but; however, post Rushdie, we are being able to look at the political dimensions of this work and also read it as a postmodern as well a post-colonial work.

And again we also know that with Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* we are also being inaugurated into a different kind of post-colonial rhetoric which is postmodern as well where we are being told that content was not just relevant to form but determined form as well. So it is in such a context, it is from such vantage point that we access and try to make sense of a work such as *All About H. Hatterr*.

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Govindas Vishnoodas Desani

- ◊ 1909-2000
- ◊ A child prodigy, expelled from school
- ◊ University professor, journalist, spent time in monasteries

So who is G.V Desani, he was Govindas Vishnoodas Desani who was born in 1909 and lived till 2000. He was considered as a child prodigy. He was expelled from school at the age of 13 or 14 because the history just felt that he was basically unteachable and however he ended up having a very diverse varied carrier. He was a university professor. He taught philosophy at the University of Texas.

He was a journalist. He had worked with BBC and also spent considerable time in monasteries and this also had a bearing in the way his work was framed and also in the general lifestyle that he adopted. All About H. Hatterr is incidentally the only novel that he produced but he had also published a number of short stories and after 1952 we find him coming to living back to India.

But the critical attention and the general interest in his life and carrier was always limited throughout his lifetime.

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All About H.Hatterr

- o Published in London - 1948 ✓
- o Debut work of a young Kenya-born Indian journalist based in London
- o Chronicles the adventures of an Anglo-Malay man in search of wisdom and enlightenment
- o "I said H. Hatterr was a portrait of a man, the common vulgar species, found everywhere, both in the East and in the West" (Desani)

All About H. Hatterr was first published in London in the year 1948 and the work was an instant success. It was acknowledged as a debut work of a young Kenya-born Indian journalist who was based in London and this work primarily chronicles the adventures of an Anglo-Malay man. So it is a hybrid character that we have and he is in search of wisdom and enlightenment.

And that the novel goes on to mock this in various aspect is a different story altogether. Desani himself has said about Hatterr that he was a portrait of a man, the common vulgar species found everywhere both in the East and in the West. Neither the novel nor the author Desani makes any deliberate attempt to locate this character in a particular nation or in a particular place.

So he continues to be seen throughout the novel as a rather rootless individual who is experimenting with various kinds of truths.

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Well-received

- o "[Desani's novel] is an extended verbal jag that has already set London highbrows searching vainly for similes..." (Hatterr, Farrar, Straus & Young, 1951)
- o "Desani entertained and amazed the literati of post-war Britain with a book in which, "English speech is laid open as if with a carving knife." (Bruce Bain)." (Hatterr Saturn Press, London, 1948)

The novel was very well received as soon as it was published and these are some of the responses which also made it to the blurbs of the earlier editions of this novel. Desani's novel is an extended verbal jag that has already set London highbrows searching vainly for similes. Desani entertained and amazed the literati of post-war Britain with a book in which English speech is laid open as if with a carving knife.

So these are some of the rave reviews that this work received, so it is important to notice that right at the beginning while it enjoyed tremendous success. It was also received well in the high literary circus in the highbrow literary circus as well. Eliot had a couple of nice things to say about H. Hatterr.

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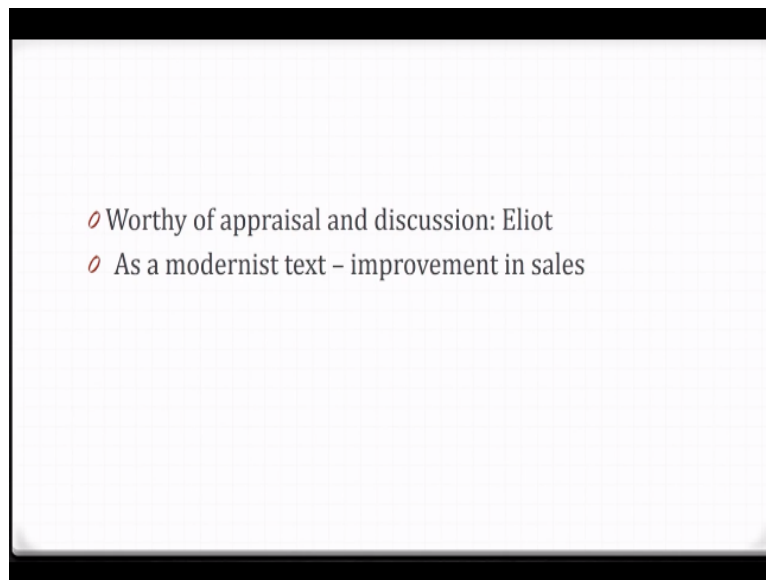
Eliot on Hatterr

- o "Certainly a remarkable book. In all my experience, I have not met anything quite like it. It is amazing that anyone should be able to sustain a piece of work in this style and tempo at such length"

He remarked that this is certainly a remarkable book and in all my experience I have not met anything quite like it. It is amazing that anyone should be able to sustain a piece of work in this style and tempo at such length. Why Eliot does not shower this work with a lot of praise? This intervention did do a lot of good as far as Desani is concerned. Here we also need to recall the status that Eliot had in the modernist English literary tradition as the literary tastemaker of the times.

He was the editor of Faber. He was a modernist poet. He was a well-acclaimed writer. He was a new patent of new talent. He was a patent of new talent and more importantly he was noble laureate. So all of these also made Eliot's opinion very important as far as in determining the carrier of H. Hatterr and the success of H. Hatterr.

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And Eliot did acknowledge that this is worthy of appraisal and discussion. He did help people generate lot of interest in this text and this was introduced, this was opposition and celebrated as a modernist text and this also helped in improving the sales of H. Hatterr at least for a while.

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Critical reception

- Constantly compared to James Joyce's works, 'Indian Finnegan's Wake'; 'the Indian Ulysses' ✓
- Acknowledge the novelty of Desani's style but ignored its deeper implications (Gopal)
- Placed among the likes of Rudyard Kipling

But the critical reception was only in certain limited ways, it was constantly compared to James Joyce's works, it was celebrated with these epithets such as Indian Finnegan's Wake or Indian Ulysses. Finnegan's Wake and Ulysses being two of the important works by James Joyce, the modernist writer and however at a later point Priyamvada Gopal makes this intervention and says that while all of these critics while all of these critical interventions acknowledge the novelty of Desani's style, they ignored its deeper implications.

This was made possible only after Rushdie started acknowledging the influence that Hatterr had on his literary carrier and similarly Desani was also placed among the likes of Rudyard Kipling giving him a very distinct kind of a post-colonial status. As stated in the beginning of this lecture, this book had a very complicated publishing history.

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The history of the book

- Short-lived success - Disappeared
- A re-discovery in the 1970s - restricted to the Western academia
 - Taught Indian philosophy in Texas
- Discovered yet again - 1982 - Anthony Burgess' introduction
 - Established the work as a 'modern classic'
- First Indian edition - 1985 - Gulab Vazirani for Arnold Heinemann Publishers

Initially, this had tremendous success which was very short-lived and then soon after then in the following decades, the book literary disappeared. It was out of print; it was not available. Nobody was talking about it. So there are certain moments which have been identified which resulted in the re-interest in the resurrection of this book at various points of time. One of this happened in the 1970s when there was a re-discovery of this work.

This was during the phase when Desani was teaching a philosophy in Texas; however, this sort of an interest was restricted to the Western academia. It was mostly his students who revived an interest in this and even today some of the best known works on G. V. Desani's All About H. Hatterr could be found only from the Western academia. The work was discovered yet again in 1982 when Anthony Burgess developed a renewed interest in this work and this was published again with an introduction by Anthony Burgess.

This is also the edition which most of us are perhaps using and this intervention, Anthony Burgess intervention is something which established this work as a modern classic and ever since there has been though in a limited way there has been a critical attention on this work and the first Indian edition was published in 1985.

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Burgess on Hatterr's use of English

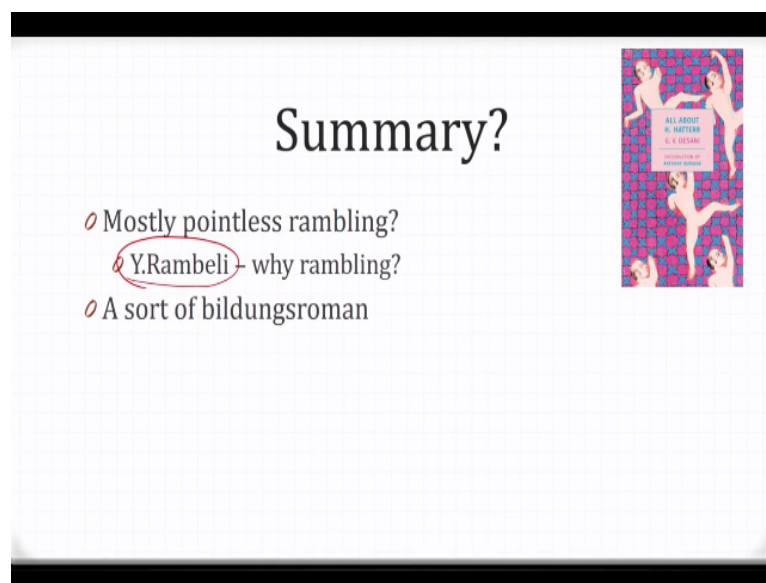
"It is what might be called Whole Language, in which philosophical terms, the colloquialisms of Calcutta and London, Shakespearian archaisms, bazaar whinings, quack spiels, references to the Hindu pantheon, the jargon of Indian litigation, and shrill babu irritability seethe together. It is not pure English; it is, like the English of Shakespeare, Joyce, and Kipling, gloriously impure." (Burgess as quoted in Lennon 42)

And we need to also know what exactly Burgess had to say about Hatterr particularly about his use of English and again here we need to understand it even with this intervention which revived a lot of interest in this work. Burgess also in multiple ways a foreground in the modernist elements, some modernist aspects of this work where he focused more on the aspect of language.

So here I read from the introduction by Burgess. It is what might be called Whole Language, in which philosophical terms, the colloquialisms of Calcutta and London, Shakespearian archaisms, bazaar whinings, quack spiels, references to the Hindu pantheon, the jargon of Indian litigation, and shrill babu irritability seethe together. It is not pure English. It is like the English of Shakespeare, Joyce and Kipling, gloriously impure.

So this is how Burgess spoke about the use of English in All About H. Hatterr. Now we come to this mandatory aspect of every discussion related to a novel talking about the summary.

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But if you have already taken a look at this work, if you are familiar with this work All About H. Hatterr and if you find that this is mostly pointless rambling, I would not be surprised because this is one of the initial responses that this novel would generate to any first time reader, interesting hilarious coinage he has, there is a character Y.Rambeli which also reads like Y.Rambeli and if you take a look at the novel right at the first page when the introduction is given, you can find the mention of this character Y.Rambeli.

It would perhaps be very appropriate to say that this is a sort of bildungsroman but however giving a summary is not an easy task, though we will be taking a look at some of the aspects which have made this work extremely interesting and relevant even in the contemporary when we talk about Indian Fiction in English.

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Some unique aspects

- Desani's use of language – manipulation of English
 - 'throwing the continents together with the mixture of English as she is written and spoken all over the world" (Gopal)
- A stateless protagonist
 - "the mongrel product of imperial expansion whom no nation will claim"
- Desani's India: British India
- No way constricted by national contours

There are certain unique aspects which define this work in particular ways. Desani's use of English language which is more been like a manipulation of English language has been talked about much in Priyamvada Gopal's words, what he has successfully done is throwing the continents together with the mixture of English as she has written and spoken all over the world.

And we also find that the protagonist is a stateless person, a stateless protagonist and he has been described as the mongrel product of imperial expansion whom no nation will claim. At this point, before we get into the heart of the novel, it is also important to keep in mind that Desani's India is British India which included parts of Burma, the current Myanmar as well.

And this protagonist who manipulates English language, who does not belong to any of the states or any of the nations and he is not constricted by national contour side that this is the advantage that this protagonist has and Desani very deliberately uses this as a strategy to present a character who cannot be limited by any of the aspects such as language ethnicity or nationality.

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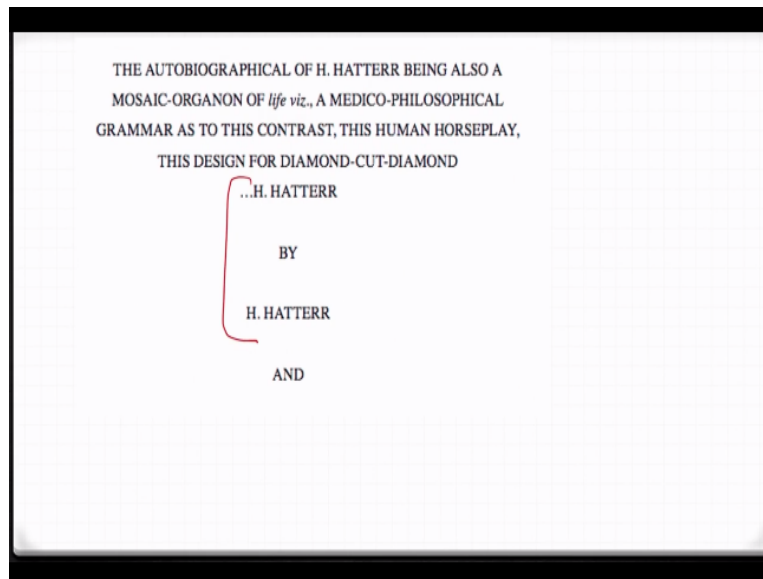
All About . . .

The structure of the novel is very interesting, it has an introduction which is titled All About and this introduces the text, it talks about the compulsive lying nature of the narrator as well. Here we also find certain similarities with Rushdie's narrator. I read to you very briefly from this section, the introductory session known as All About, London October 23, 1945 therefore during 39, 45 these warring years, an appalling thing happened to me.

I acquired a major fault, I became secretive, told lies at any rate, rarely to the whole truth. Life seemed so many clashes and contests, sorry and well a mention helps. Now discredit me if you wish but I play safe, I lie only to the trusting, foremost among them Kumari, the most loyal and faithful of friends. So here is a writer who begins this novel by talking about how this is not entirely truth, how he has this habit of weaving a lot of lies into all of his narration.

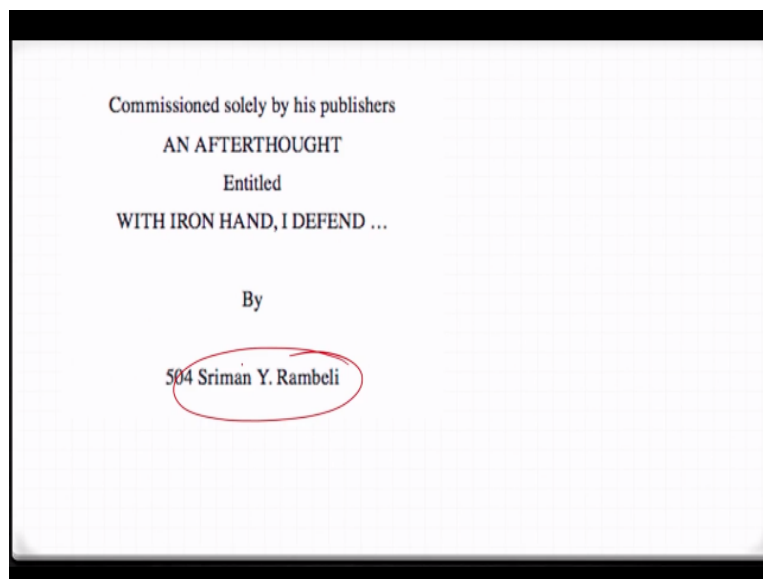
And this sort of an acknowledgement is very interesting because we find interesting parallels with Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* as well.

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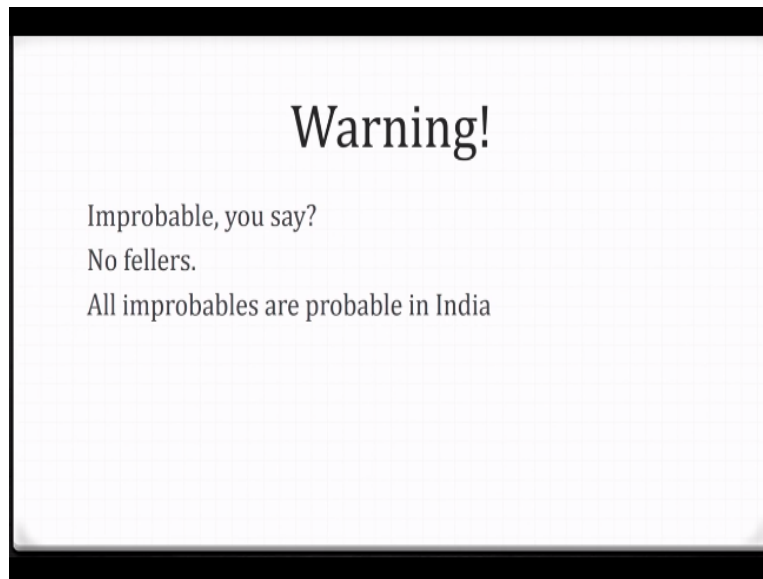
And this is a first page of the book, this is not the title page but this is how the novel begins and this interestingly comes after the introductory session title All About and it is a very long title which has been deliberately given the autobiographical of H. Hatterr being also a mosaic-organon of life namely a medico-philosophical grammar as to this contrast, this human horseplay, this design for diamond-cut-diamond H. Hatterr by H. Hatterr.

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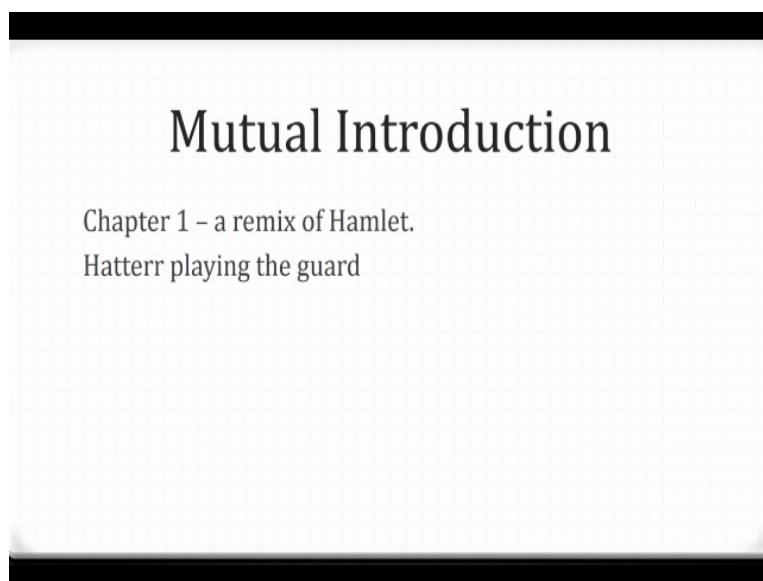
And commissioned solely by his publishers An Afterthought entitled with Iron Hand, I Defend by Sriman and Y. Rambeli. So there is a pun with life, there is a playful use of language, there is a deliberate use of lot of subversive techniques, this is an interesting read right from the beginning; however, the structure is very complicated. It uses its deliberate strategy of teasing the reader from the beginning till the end.

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And this is a next section which is titled warning and it begins with this note improbable, you say? No fellers. All improbables are probable in India. You here also notice the use of English in a very irreverent way.

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The introduction is also known as mutual introduction. It is not a one-way communication from the author to the reader. He is initiating the possibility of mutual introduction and interplay between the text, reader and the author and this also becomes postmodernist in certain elements at this point. The chapter 1 is a remix of Hamlet and it may even begin to read like one incoherent mass.

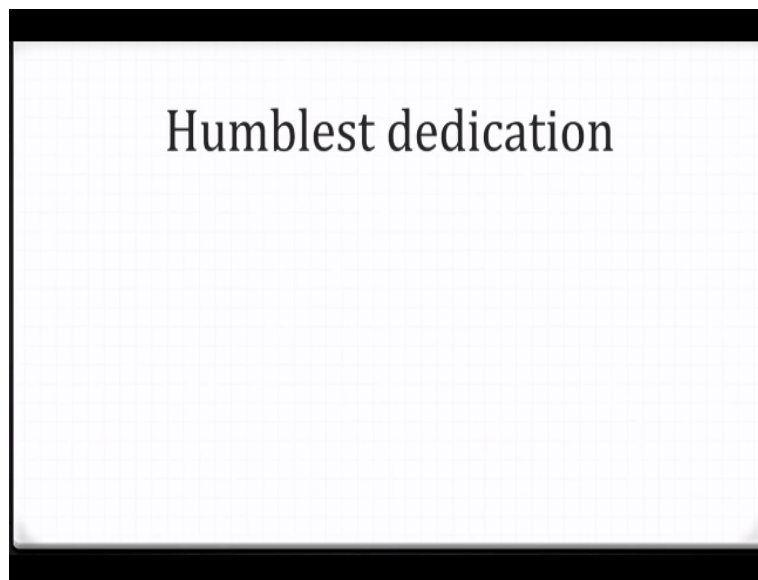
I read to you the first few phrases. It is not even entire sentences, this is a structure in the form of a play when it begins that are incoherent exchanges and soliloquies to begin with.

The issue, the following answers the question. Who is H. Hatterr? He is soliloquizing, 12 o' clock and all is well, none is about, it is so quiet, he listens but hist what was that, some unapproaching he pauses, who comes there? Halt, approach, all is not well.

He is a figure of a feller who are to thou fellow thou with I folio, how now out in the streets of scribes this hour of the night disquitening the graves of the great, bygone I same, would not be gone, vanished like hailstones, go trudge. Here we find a representation, a re-enlivening of the ghost seen from Hamlet, this is how this book begins and Hatterr is of course playing the role of the guard over here.

And then we towards the end of the novel, there are very unusual things which are coming together.

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There is a humblest dedication which is also part of this work and this is also a very postmodern thing which is being done in this novel though this predates all kinds of discussions related to the event of postmodernism. There are also personal footnotes that Desani gives and these are fairly long.

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Personal footnotes

And he talks about these in rather irreverent and very subversive ways. We will not go into the details of this and to give you a sense of the kind of language which is being used, I here show an excerpt from the text.

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An excerpt

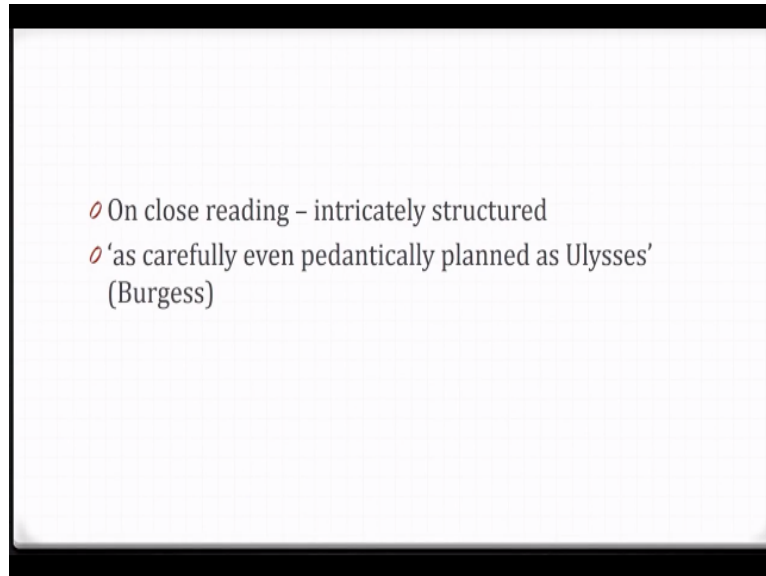
*(...Wherefore, pious brethren, by confessing I lie, yoiks! I tell the truth, sort of topholy trumpeting-it, by the Pharisee G.V. Desani: see the feller's tract All About ..., publisher, the same publishing company): a language deliberately designed to mystify the majority, tempt 'em to start guessing, and interpreting our real drift, and allegory, what the hell we mean: pursue our meaning on their *sthula* (gross), the *sukshana* (subtle) and *para* (supreme) planes, and levels, and still miss the issue and dash their heads against the crazy-paved rock of confusion.*

And in the first part you can even see there is a lot of experimenting with the language which is being done and there is also a deliberate way in which it moves away from all kinds of rules with spelling, grammatical relevance, all of this is being taken for a toss in this novel throughout.

A language deliberately designed to mystify the majority, tempt them to start guessing and interpreting our real drift, and allegory, what the hell we mean; pursue our meaning on their *sthula* gross, the *sukshana* subtle and *para* supreme planes and levels and still miss the issue

and dash their heads against the crazy-paved rock of confusion. Here you may also notice the use of very Indian words which is also telling element across the novel from the beginning till the end.

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This will sound like mindless rambling at the outset and you may even feel a little discouraged to continue reading the novel, but however I must tell you that on close reading the intricate structure of this novel begins to reveal itself to us as Burgess himself says it is as carefully even pedantically planned as Ulysses. If you are familiar with the modernist text Ulysses, it is considered as one of the most difficult text ever written.

And in fact Joyce himself said about his work that his work will keep the English professors busy for another 100 years and it has been found to be quite true as well. We find a number of secondary material now trying to make us understand what Ulysses means. The similar kind of a thing could be said about this Indian Ulysses, this text All About H. Hatterr, it is difficult to make sense of it.

Because it is the intricate structures are very carefully and even pedantically planned as Burgess would say and coming back to the novel and trying to make sense of some of the aspects that the novel foregrounds, who is this character Hatterr?

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Who is Hatterr?

- Hindustanwallah Hatterr - a rootless orphan
- A comic odyssey
- 55 year old orphaned son of a European seaman and a non-Christian woman from Malaya
- Adopted by an Indian-based Scotsman
- "I haven't had any mother to love me . . I have no relations, don't you see! I am afraid, can't you see"

H. Hatterr is Hindustanwallah Hatterr. He is a rootless orphan. His story is being narrated as a comic odyssey. When this narration begins, he is a 55-year-old orphan son of a European seaman and a non-Christian woman from Malaya, she is from Penang and we get to know from the narration that Hatterr loses his parents at a very young age when he is 1-year-old and he is adopted by an Indian-based Scotsman.

He does not lament over any of these facts rather all of these things are very playfully and comically put forward. This is what he says, I have not had any mother to love me, I have had no relations, do not you see, I am afraid cannot you see. So this is how H. Hatter Hindustanwallah Hatterr is presented to us.

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Plot and characters

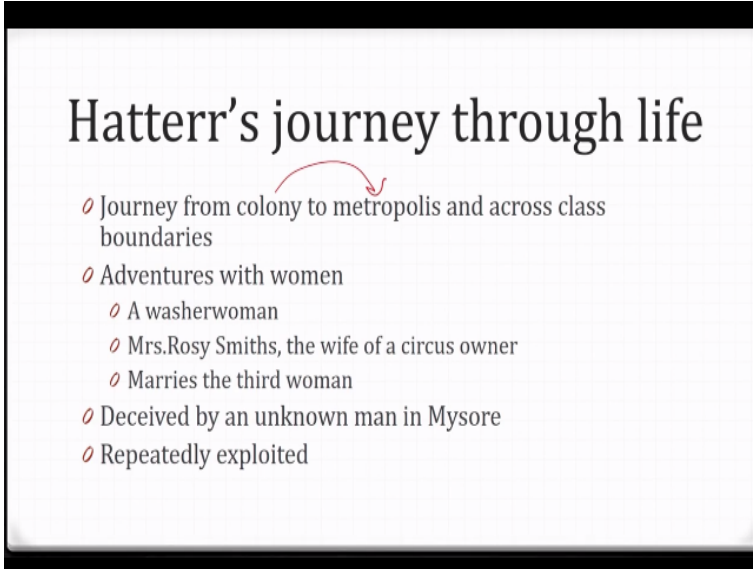
- Runs away from school at the age of 14
- Educated by five Indian sages, three women and a South Indian loanshark - humorously depicted
- Sage of Wilderness, Always Happy, Sage Master Anand Gri Gri, the Naga Sadhu, Punchum
 - Fake sage who robs him
 - Ridicules the sacred relation between the sage and the disciple

About the plot and characters, we also find certain similarities with the character of Desani himself especially about the very different kind of schooling and child that he had. So this character Hindustanwallah Hatterr rather H. Hatterr, he runs away from school at the age of 14 and we find him getting a different kind of an education. He is educated by five Indian sages, three women and a South Indian loanshark.

And all of this is humorously depicted without any element of sympathy and this was also been celebrated as a coming of each novel. In that sense, it gets described as a bildungsroman. So the sage is that he means there are different chapters devoted to his encounter with these different sages, one is Sage of Wilderness, Always Happy, Sage Master Anand Gri Gri, the Naga Sadhu, Punchum, these are the interesting kind of names which are being given to the sages.

There is also among this fake sage who robs him. What Desani is doing is to ridicule the sacred relation. We assume sacred relation between sage and the disciple. There is also one instance when he realized that the sage is about 30 years younger than the disciple and the sage refers to Hatterr as uncle Hatterr and Hatterr refers to the sage as a boy. So there is a deliberate subversion of all kinds of these sorts of hierarchical relations as we can see and we also get to know the crux of the novel is Hatterr's journey through life.

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Hatterr's journey through life

- ◊ Journey from colony to metropolis and across class boundaries
- ◊ Adventures with women
 - ◊ A washerwoman
 - ◊ Mrs. Rosy Smiths, the wife of a circus owner
 - ◊ Marries the third woman
- ◊ Deceived by an unknown man in Mysore
- ◊ Repeatedly exploited

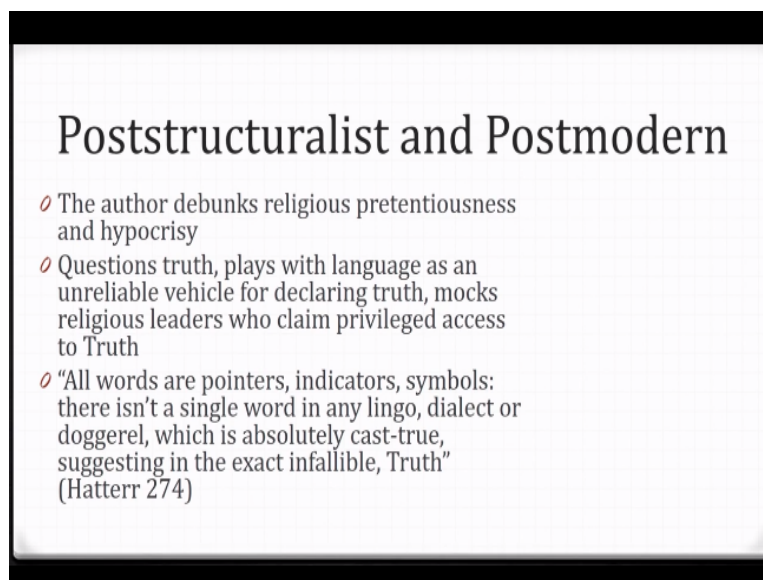
And we also find him moving from one place to the other and also suffering the anxieties of being rootless and this mind you are not narrated with a tone of regret but rather Desani tries to find some comedy out of it. He tries to make a mockery of this entire situation. We find

Hatterr's journey from colony to metropolis and also this traverses all kinds of class boundaries and he also has different exciting kinds of adventures with a woman.

First, he encounters a washerwoman who also educates him in different ways. It is an amorous washerwoman who make sexual advances towards Hatterr which he also raises certain ways and then there is the wife of a circus owner with whom he has a relation Mrs. Rosy Smiths and the third woman that he has an encounter with becomes Hatterr's wife as well and his alter dissolution with these various relationships and these encounters that he had with these women.

We find that he is also deceived by an unknown man in Mysore and he is also a character who is being repeatedly exploited and all of this is humorously depicted with a playful use of language of time, nonlinear narration and the sort of things.

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This novel can be seen as poststructuralist and postmodern at the same time though this was published in 1948 much before the discussions about postmodernism or poststructuralism were in vogue and this novel was historically can be considered as a modernist work but the elements that it foregrounds is more of postmodern in nature, we would see in hindsight. There is normal debunks, religious pretentiousness and hypocrisy.

And we also find that there is this dalliance with questions of truth. The text plays with languages in unreliable vehicle for declaring truth and he also mocks religious leaders who claim very secretive privileged access to truth and this is what Hatterr himself says in

Desani's words. All words are pointers, indicators, symbols. There is not a single word in any lingo, dialect or doggerel, which is absolutely cast-true suggesting the exact infallible truth.

So this could be even said as crux of this work where the contemporary relevance also can be located because there is a very predominant very succinct pointed rejection of all kinds of pretentiousness, religious hypocrisy and those vices which are incidentally and rather unfortunately part and parcel of modernity and life that followed.

So as we begin to sum up, I need to reiterate that the objective of this lecture was not to provide a summary of this work but to generate an interest and taking a look at this work going back in time and seeing H. Hatterr for whatever it was worth for and I also believe that any discussion on a field such as Indian Fiction in English would be rather incomplete if you do not take a look at the work such as H. Hatterr.

And till date the critical interest in this work continues to be limited and I would also say that there is an immense possibility as far as this work is concerned to propel lot of research work, to generate lot of research interest and I just wind up by again bringing this connection between Desani and Rushdie with which we began the outset of this lecture. This is extremely important to see these connections.

Because the moment we begin to recognize that, the story of Indian Fiction in English lies in different places, the starting points cannot be very conveniently located always within the nationalist contours, always within this geographic locale. We also begin to see interesting possibilities for understanding this field of study for approaching this discipline itself in a very different way altogether and thank you for listening.