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Buffeted by History: Trauma of Holocaust(s) in *Baumgartner's Bombay*

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Abstract: Anita Desai is one of the pioneers of women writings in India. Her theme largely articulates Indian women entangled in the patriarchal tradition. But since the publication of her novel *In Custody*, she shifts her focus from the world of women and ventures into male territories. In these novels, she highlights historical, political events influencing her male protagonist and does not fail to capture their impacts on the male psyche. In *Baumgartner's Bombay*, she defies the stereotyped binaries of East and West to portray the traumatic effects of historical violence upon its victims. This paper attempts a parallel study of racial violence of the West and religious violence of the East which imposes life without leaning on the novel's central character a German Jew, named Baumgartner.

Keywords: *Holocaust, Partition, Violence, Anti-Semitism*

Anita Desai brought women writers in Indian English literature into public consciousness. She has been prolific in creating narratives on Indian women. But from her novel *In Custody* (1984) she moves ahead and delves deep into the male psyche. Her *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988) seems to us a travelogue of a man, Hugo covering both Occident and Orient. In the novel, she weaves together her exilic experiences along with her parents'. She, like Rushdie's Saleem Senai, shows Baumgartner handcuffed to history during two manmade catastrophes—Nazi holocaust and the Partition of the Indian subcontinent. Her protagonist Baumgartner, a Jew carries the indelible etch of Holocaust which forces his banishment from his own country. Hence it is imperative to revisit the cause and consequence of holocaust in Germany.

The word holocaust has several interpretations; etymologically it consists of word “holos” meaning burn and “kaustos” meaning sacrificial offering to God. Oxford English Dictionary described the word as Hitler’s treatment of the Jews. But it is not a new phenomenon in Europe. Anti-Semitism was always flowing as an undercurrent in the cultural flow of Europe since she embraced Christianity. Be it Marlow’s *Jew of Malta* or Shakespeare’s Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, Jews, Gypsies and Black people of Europe are always bracketed as ‘Other.’ They were either look down upon or seen with an eye of suspicion. Although industrialization of Europe somehow made this feeling dormant, but its effects and rush for power and wealth spade worked the unleashing of two man-made catastrophes in the form of the First and the Second World War respectively. Invoking of war-sentiment requires the arousal of communal feeling that is the purity of blood and culture among the people of any country. This is done to fabricate lore of feeling of hatred for other community. Adolf Hitler the high priest of Second World-War did the same with the Jew.

He sacrificed the Jews and other community living in Germany at the altar of racism to project himself as an avenger of the ignominious treaty of Versailles. Thus in the name of restoring the honour of Germany he foregrounded racial politics. His party, the Nazis, appropriated the evolutionary theory of Charles to substantiate their argument that language and culture of Aryan were somehow superior to other races. Hitler's Nazi party spread propaganda that Germany was the original land of Aryans. Consequently, Germans were the original descendants of Aryans. Therefore, they held that Germans are superior race and the fittest for the survival in their fatherland i.e. Germany. To unify Germans under the Nazi banner, Nazis played the racial card. They began to discriminate against the sophisticated and relatively well-off minority population of Jews. Then in order to create a popular opinion against the Jews, Nazi used media. The newspaper *der stuner*, a Nazi mouthpiece published in bold letters "The Jews are our misfortune" and often caricatured them as weak and deformed. Hitler after becoming the Chancellor of Germany began to use the state apparatus against his rival politicians. Within a short span of time, Hitler became the dictator of Germany. This enabled Hitler to legitimize and consolidate his policies. The Nazis got the free reign to utilize all means of state mechanism to

silence their oppositions. They re-organized and sophisticated the police and the armed force to secure their aims and execute their policies. The Gestapo or the police force became synonymous to terror.

In September 1939, the Nazis invaded Poland and began to build ghettos for Jews in Poland. By 1940 the Nazis forced the Jew population to move into ghettos. Those dingy ghettos were overpopulated and detached from the rest of society. Many people died out of starvation and lack of basic amenities in the suffocative environment of those ghettos. The survivors were generally taken to a death camp by the Nazis. In June 1941 Germany attacked the Soviet Union by violating the Non-aggression pact between the two nations. They broke the hell on Jews by bringing to affect the "Final Solution" which means ethnic cleansing of Jews by poisonous gas. This organized state-sponsored inhuman mass murder of the Jews was something the humanity has never seen before. The ethnic cleansing of the Nazis by murdering Jews was systematic and annihilating which led to the mass killing of Jewish men, women and children with poisonous gas. In almost every country invaded by Nazis, the Jews were forced to identify them by wearing special badges. They were arrested without any provocation, put into the concentration camps or ghettos and transported to the death camp as if they were manufacturing commodities on the conveyer belt carried to the dispatch section of any factory.

In the novel, Baumgartner's family also passed through the corridor of Nazi violence. Hugo was a child when he faces the brunt of the violence. His father was arrested by Nazis and released after a fortnight. He could not sustain the trauma and committed suicide. His mother had to sell off their business to a Nazi Aryan. Hugo at a very tender age was kept as an apprentice by a new German owner of his father's business as a sign of mercy. Eventually, his mother had to surrender their house to that German family and start living in the small office-room with her son. Things were moving against their hope from bad to worse. The Germans were so terrified of their *fuehrer's* whims and fancies and above all his suspicion of treachery that they feel guilty of every thought of disobedience and disloyalty occurred in their mind. Herr Pfuehl, the new German owner didn't want to be proven disloyal to his *fuehrer* by sheltering a Jew family.

He was afraid of being accused of harbouring Jews when Hitler was trying to rid the sacred fatherland of them – so his wife had said and she was not so stupid. Nor was Pfuehl entirely in disagreement with the Fuehrer’s plans and ambitions (*BB* 68.)

Finally, it was decided that Hugo would be sent all alone to India, a British colony to survive the Holocaust. Thus he found how the effect of a painful historical event like holocaust grinded and crushed individual's life. Hugo all of a sudden dismembered from his mother and mother-land was traumatized and shivering within an urge for relocation. In one of the interview when Anita Desai was asked about Hugo's miserable life as a case of the typical human condition, she said:

Very much I think of it as the human condition. I see his condition as not being one of extraordinary suffering, but of suffering which fit in with the general scheme of things. The subject of all my books has been what Ortega Y Gasset called “the terrors of facing, single-handed, the ferocious assaults of existence.” (“A Conversation with Anita Desai” 28-29)

Baumgartner's Bombay, like other novels of Anita Desai, to reflects the vision that destiny drags an individual's life, which forces Hugo to come to India. The clouds of his misfortunes always overcast his fate. He landed in British India when the Second World War was on its full swing. He tried to settle down in Calcutta. His desire for a new future in Calcutta passes through the light and shady phases of his partnership business with Indians and friendship with Lotte. But he could not escape for a long time from the disastrous effect of the war in the British colony India. The British government had him arrested because of his German origin on suspicion of being a member of the Nazi party or simply a German citizen living in an enemy country like the British colony India. In the detention camp, Baumgartner's appeal to distinguish himself as a German Jew and related his political exile in India had fallen in the deaf ear of the British. British officials in the detention camp betray their ignorance about the difference between Baumgartner’s German identity and German Jew identity. In India, he was moved from one detention camp to another detention camp until the war was over. Thus Baumgartner came to India to save himself from the Nazi party’s racial onslaught, ironically found himself imprisoned for being a German national and most naturally a suspected Nazi in British India.

After the Second World War was over, Baumgartner was released from the detention camp. He went to the hotel he used to stay, in desperation to get any letter from his mother. The manager gave him letters from his mother but he found that none of them dated later than February 1941. He immediately realizes that his mother had been killed in the Concentration camp. It seems to us that he inherited a sense of loss from the letters of his mother. Suffering from the loss of his mother his lost link with his motherland, he decided to live in a decayed house in Calcutta. The house and the locality he chooses to exhibit his lament for the loss of his mother. His life became standstill as it has no answer to his existential question.

He made no attempt to find and return to the Calcutta life of before the war. He kept away from Park Street, from Chowringhee, from Flury's and the Grand hotel and Prince's and the 300. The Calcutta he lived in now – the Calcutta that had seen the famine of 1943, that had prepared for a Japanese attack, that had been used and drained by the war and war profiteers and now prepared for the great partition – was the proper setting for his mourning. The Calcutta of the black back streets, the steaming rubbish tips, the scarred tenements, its hunger, its squalor, its desolation. The hopelessness of it seemed right to Baumgartner; this was how the world ended, there was no other ending. (*BB* 197)

Meanwhile, Calcutta was preparing for another historical turmoil. Baumgartner in the detention camp was always keen to know news from the western front. Hence he was unaware of happenings in India. Indian's struggle for independence reaches its peak during the Second World War. In the year 1942 Gandhiji gave the call of "do or die" in the Quit India Movement. On the other hand, the Muslim League was raising its demand for an independent Muslim country. Calcutta suffers a man-made famine anticipating Japanese attack. Baumgartner could not read the lull before the storm of partition. Baumgartner needs money for his survival after his release from the detention camp. He went to search for his business partner Habibullah. He was afraid that he will not be able to locate him in the famine-hit city where thousands flee due to the risk of the Japanese attack. He found Habibullah and wished to restart his business with him thinking that all quiet in the western front means the

return of peace and stability in India. "Now the war was over, Baumgartner gently suggested, moving the inkwells and the gluepots around on the desk delicately, he hoped to get back to his former business" (BB 198). He comes to know from Habibullah about the independence of India and partition.

Due to the Second World War and the debacle of the British forces at the hand of axis power like Germany in the West and Japan in the East raises the hope of Indian independence from the British yoke. Secular forces under the leadership of Indian National Congress party and communal forces under the leadership of the Muslim League began to bid their separate nationalistic agenda. While the former bided for the Independence of undivided India, the later promised for Pakistan, as an independent Muslim country for Indian Muslims. The origin of this feud is deep-seated in the history of India as well as in the divide and rule policy of the British colonizers. Both the party blamed each other for playing communal politics. The Muslim League offered itself as the guardian of their economically backward Muslim brothers. They indoctrinated a terror among Indian Muslim that I.N.C.'s plead for establishing India as an independent secular country is a farfetched dream. They highlighted the concurrent custom among Hindus, of treating Muslim as *Mleccha* meaning barbarian and therefore untouchable. They claimed that in the guise of secularity, Muslim will be marginalized in the Hindu majority country like India. Hence, Pakistan is the only alternative for Indian Muslim, where they will form the majority. On the other hand, I.N.C. mainly belonged to western educated middle-class India who persisted in their agenda of secular India. Both the parties remained firm in their own agenda. The outgoing British government, instead of offering a solution to the steal maid situation, drew up a plan off partitioning India. Muslim majority area under the British rule will form Pakistan and Hindu majority area will constitute India or Hindustan. However, five hundred sixty-six princely states at the lapse of British paramountcy may join any side or remain independent. This agitated the common people very much. On 16th August 1946 in order to force the cause for Pakistan Md. Ali Jinnah declared a direct action day in Calcutta, and a religious riot of partition started. It took the shape of religious genocide throughout north India and its trauma is still persisting. The leaders became the power broker and agreed to partition

India. Accordingly, Pakistan and India were born on 14th and 15th of August respectively. In the novel, Baumgartner hears these things from his former business partner Habibullah, who was reacting to the crisis.

For us — India is finished. Don't you know, every night they come and threatened us in our house? Every night they set some Muslim house on fire, stab some Muslim in the street, and rob him too. Don't you know *sahib* they are driving us out?'

'who?' asked, Baumgartner, puzzled ...

'These — these Congress-wallahs, *sahib*, the Hindus; 'finishes, Habibullah hissed, clutching the handkerchief to him. 'They say they will kick out the British. Even the British are saying they will leave. And this man Jinnah, and his party — they are wanting partition, they are also wanting to leave, all Muslim should leave, they say. But — how? I have so much — my family, my home, my business — what will happen to it all, *sahib*?' he cried, nearly in tears. (BB 200)

In Calcutta situation was getting worse. Roads and streets were either abandoned accepts for barricades or possessed by a procession which could become violent at any given moment. In this crisis, one is expected to take one side either 'us' or 'them'. Baumgartner experience the necessity of identifying with one side. Once on a walk, Baumgartner was stopped by barricades and face mob protesting against the trial of I.N.A. soldiers. Baumgartner ignorant of the thing enquire an onlooker about the objective of the protest. An onlooker told him the fact. But when he realized that Baumgartner was in dark about the I.N.A. he became furious and began to interrogate to which side Baumgartner belongs to. These incidents made him realize the gravity of the situation that once again he was unwillingly heading to be a part of another war. In this crunch situation, Desai shows through her minute observations that people lack the tenacity of going into the thick of the things. They were happy in finding every other person as his or her supporter. For instance, in Hugo's interactions with Sushil, we find Hugo trying to introduce himself to Sushil as a German Jew. But Sushil, an arm revolutionist turned Indian Marxist was able to recognize his German origin only. He as an Indian Marxist was not only ignorant about the history of the Holocaust but also was not ready to accept any religious history. Hence

he cherishes Hugo's identity as war return Hero because of his hatred against the British. He believed that Germans could have been the cause of Indian independence if they would have defeated British in the Second World War and in this way helped its Axis ally Japan to support Indians to claim their Independence from the British rule. One night Hugo got awoken by a scream, he found some riot activists in the street. He put himself on the loft to see the happening. He found some religious (riot) activists stabbed a person and left him bleeding profusely, shouting their religious slogan as a battle cry, very common in those days. Hugo recognized the blood-drenched person was none other, but his friend Sushil. It brought back the traumatic experiences of the Holocaust. He was already suffering from his loss of his mother, readily equated the murder of Sushil with the probable killing of his mother in the Concentration Camp. Then he went to trace Habibullah in his office. He found no trace of him in his ransacked office and compared his exile to his own.

Anita Desai departing from her other novels with isolated characters portrays Hugo as a connecting point to draw a parallel between racial Holocaust in Germany and religious partition riots in Calcutta to project a pattern of organized violence and its traumatic effects on its victims. Baumgartner unable to locate Habibullah lost his entire hopes to resume his business and went to Bombay for a new start where he is finally killed by a German, named Kurt. Thus through the eyes of Baumgartner, Anita Desai tells us the tale of the Partition-struck city of Calcutta.

In conclusion, Desai in her novel shows Hugo Baumgartner surviving the trauma of racial and religious violence both in West and East. His memories foreground his life. We find Hugo constantly associating and comparing his experiences in India with his German memory. Desai endowed the text its true biographical colour by using three languages: German, English and Hindi. Hence her narration and characterization appear lively. She delineated Hugo as a representative figure of the exiled people who become landless as well as language-less. They are bound to adopt other's world with a constant threat to their existence. In fact, she presents with the global problem of World War refugee with her usual minute observations. But one may wonder about the passivity of Baumgartner who unlike Lotte, the vibrant female protagonist, always submits his reign of life to his fate. Desai in this

novel has successfully blurred the binaries between West and East linking the two in their historical projects of violence and their traumatic effects on the memories of the victims and their life.

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