

# Anti-Semitism in Baumgartner's Bombay by Anita Desai

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## Abstract

Anita Desai presents an Indian view of the "Jew" in Baumgartner's Bombay. Baumgartner is a Holocaust survivor who enters the Hindu-Muslim divide in India during the violence of partition and independence. Baumgartner's Bombay presents the dual mirror of the Jew in Europe and the Muslim in India. Each suffers exclusion and expulsion, and each is a stranger at home in a multicultural ocean of humanity. Baumgartner is the Other's Other who, through his passage to India in Venice and later in the internment camp, grasps an identity that remains elusive, denied, and unclaimed, in a postcolonial paradigm of rootless hybridity. And it is in these lower if not lowest depths that he meets his nemesis: the Nordic-looking German junkie: "That fair hair that peeled flesh it was a certain type that Baumgartner had escaped, forgotten. Then why had this boy to come after him, in lederhosen, in marching boots striding over the mountains to the sound of the Wander vogels lied? In her ninth novel, Indian writer Desai (Clear Light of Day, In Custody), whose mother was German and father Indian, explores the troubled life of a German Jew who flees the Holocaust by going to India. The book superimposes a plethora of detail about Germany before the Holocaust and German detention in India onto a crisis in the present. When the German hippie kills him for a few tarnished silver trophies, Lotte is his only mourner. Brings to vivid light, with pathos, a different kind of suffering and exile forced upon the wandering Jew.

## I. Introduction

*l'homme moyen sensuel, . . . vainly trying to integrate himself into a culture to which he is essentially alien. And this predicament of the Jew is merely a magnification of the predicament of modern man himself, bewildered and homeless in a mechanical world of his own creation.*

Anita Desai ushered in new possibilities for Indian-English writers and paved way for the recognition in the global map. One of India's foremost writers, Indian novelist, short-story writer and children's author, Anita Desai is indeed a name to reckon with in the field of literature. Winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award and Guardian Children's Fiction Prize, Desai has authored as many as sixteen works of fiction, some of the best ones being 'Fasting, Feasting', 'The Village By The Sea', 'In Custody', and 'Clear Light of Day'. Her distinct style of writing, her original characters and her realistic subject-line is what made her writings so endearing. Over the years, Desai won many awards and recognition for her work and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize twice. Apart from writing, Anita has been actively involved in teaching as well. She continues to be an inspiration for many young aspiring writers today.

Her fiction deals mainly with the lives of outsiders, with the circumscribed life: "people unable, or unwilling, to escape what many of us would think of as a trapped, claustrophobic existence, and who yet manage to find a measure of dignity even within those constraints" (Jai Singh). Some themes discussed in her fiction are women's oppression and quest for a fulfilling identity, family relationship and contrasts, the crumbling of traditions, and anti-Semitism (Prano).

Indian English Literature refers to the body of works by authors in India who write in English and whose native or co-native language could be one of the numerous languages of India. It is also associated with the works of members of the Indian Diaspora. The very definition of the adjective "Indian" here is hazy. Many of these writers neither live in India, nor are Indian citizens. As a category, this production comes under the broader realm of postcolonial literature – the production from previously colonised countries such as India. Though one can trace such writers in India to a century back, Indian writing in English has come into force only in the last couple of decades or so, as far as literature goes.

Meaning of Anti-Semitism would be prejudice against, hatred of, or discrimination against Jews as an ethnic, religious, or racial group. A person who holds such positions is called an anti-Semite. Anti-Semitism is widely considered to be a form of racism. Anti-Semitism may be manifested in many ways, ranging from expressions of hatred of or discrimination against individual Jews to organized violent attacks by mobs, state police, or even military attacks on entire Jewish communities. Although the term did not come into common usage until the 19th century, it is now also applied to historic anti-Jewish incidents.

At this time, the "Jew" had become an emblem of the quintessential postcolonial migrant, at home everywhere and nowhere, a product of the postmodern condition, an exemplary figure of the repressed and humiliated of the Third World for South Asian and Caribbean writers seeking an identity in early twenty-first-century Britain. Jewish historical experience has become the measure of Black suffering and a trope for genocidal slaughter, though this is hardly the first time that persecution of the Jews has been appropriated as the emblem of another nation's suffering (for example, in the poetry of Polish patriot Adam Mickiewicz). In "A Far Cry from Africa" (1956), for example, Caribbean poet Derek Walcott (recipient of the 1992 Nobel Prize for Literature) bemoans the callous cruelty of colonial policy in its brutal exploitation of the "savages, expendable as Jews.

The author's own German half of the parental heritage is in the background of Baumgartner's Bombay (1988) - Desai's first language was German. In the story a retired Jewish businessman has escaped in his youth the Nazis to India and stayed there in poverty, taking care of stray cats. "His eyes were short-sighted and blinked half-shut against the glare that thrust itself in at the door and so he did not notice that watchman's expression as he passed him on his perch under the wooden board that bore the tenants' names - Hiramani, Taraporevala, Barodekar, Coelho, da Silva, Patel - mumbled 'Good morning, salaam', and went down the steps into the street with his bag, uncertain as ever of which language to employ. After fifty years, still uncertain, Baumgartner, du Dummkopf." A German hippie enters Baumgartner's life and his reclusive existence is shattered. In both of these books Desai has given her answer to critics, who have concluded that her characters are usually westernized middle-class professionals and therefore their problems are more close to those of Western readers

than to majority of Indian people. In *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) Desai examined the nature of pilgrimage to India through three characters - Mateo and Sophie, young Europeans, and Mother, a charismatic and mysterious woman, whose story is an earlier version of their own. Desai's perspective on India is more European than in his earlier works. *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) contrasted American and Indian culture, and male and female roles. Arun studies in Massachusetts, his sister Uma lives in India in a small provincial city. Uma lives with her parent whom she calls Mama Papa. "It was hard to believe they had ever had separate existence, that they had been separate entities and not Mama Papa in one breath... Mama Papa themselves rarely spoke of a time when they were not one. The few anecdotes they related separately acquired great significance because of their rarity, their singularity." Uma's attempts to leave home and marry create a disaster. The novel was a finalist for the 1999 Booker Prize. Since the 1950s Desai has lived in New Delhi, Calcutta, Bombay, and other Indian cities. She has been a member of the Advisory Board for English of the National Academy of Letters in Delhi and a Member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She has taught at Girton College and Smith College in England, and at Mount Holyoke College in the United States. In 1993 she became a creative writing teacher at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She has spent there for one semester each year and the rest of her time in India. Desai is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in London. She received the Guardian Award for Children's Fiction for the novel *The Village by the Sea* (1982), and the 1978 National Academy of Letters Award for *Fire on the Mountain*.

*Even though his cigarette stank — it was a local one, wrapped in a tendu leaf, fierce enough to make his head swim — he could smell the distinctive Indian odour — of dung, both of cattle and men, of smoke from the village hearts, of cattle food and cattle urine, of dust, of pungent food cooking, of old ragged clothes washed without soap and put out to dry, the aroma of poverty.*

In her ninth novel, Indian writer Desai (*Clear Light of Day*, In Custody), whose mother was German and father Indian, explores the troubled life of a German Jew who flees the Holocaust by going to India. The book superimposes a plethora of detail about Germany before the Holocaust and German detention in India onto a crisis in the present. Hugo Baumgartner lives in squalor behind Bombay's Taj Hotel with his cats and his memories. Then an encounter with fair-haired Kurt, a young German hippie desperate for drug money, unleashes his past: an affluent childhood in Berlin until Hitler came into power, when his father, after temporary detention in Dachau, committed suicide, his boycotted furniture business nearly in ruins. Hugo's trusting mother (at the time of her husband's suicide) decides to stay in Germany (and later disappears), but Hugo goes to Calcutta and gets involved in the timber business until WW II, when he's placed in a detention camp for its duration. Even in the camp, where Jews are separated from Nazis, Hugo is an outsider, and afterwards civil war between Muslims and Hindus forces him to flee to Bombay, where Chimanlal, a successful businessman, becomes his patron--the two even buy a racehorse together. When Chimanlal dies, however, his jealous son dismisses Hugo, whose only solace as he ages, always an outsider, is Lotte, a German woman he's known since his Calcutta days. When the German hippie kills him for a few tarnished silver trophies, Lotte is his only mourner. Brings to vivid light, with pathos, a different kind of suffering and exile forced upon the wandering Jew.

As we have discussed earlier, in Baumgartner's Bombay. Hugo Baumgartner is a witness of the violence accompanying the Partition. In a personal interview with Maureen Fielding, Desai asserts that the Partition and the resulting loss of friends and family is the one moment in her otherwise idyllic childhood that she would call traumatic:

I do think of my childhood as being quite extraordinarily protected, so quiet... so sheltered, really, but the indications that it wasn't so outside home and family were pretty early. By '47 I was really aware of the freedom movement and the amount of violence that had crept into the movement. I was ten when partition took place, and that was for me a major event in my life, the unforgettable one. I was aware of it in the sense of tremendous loss, not that I lost land or property, but I lost half of the people I knew, the entire Muslim population of the school I went to. Overnight it had turned into an entirely Hindu population. Even in the neighborhood amongst family and friends, suddenly all the Muslims amongst them were gone. . . There were 30 friends amongst them, and so it was an early loss of friends and a strange absence. (Desai, qtd. in Fielding: 113)

She has used her personal traumatic experience with the Partition in *Clear Light of Day*

, but in Baumgartner's Bombay she deals with the Partition in a much stronger way. The latter is based on a couple of sources of inspiration: her "desire to tell her mother's stories of life in pre-war Germany" (Desai, qtd in Fielding: 143), "a packet of letters in German" from a concentration camp that had belonged to an old German, whom she herself "used to see shuffling around [Bombay] and feeding cats" (qtd in Fielding: 143; da Silva), and her wish "to put to use the German language which was a part of [her] childhood" (qtd in da Silva).

The choice of Desai to let a German Jew, who is fleeing from the Nazi regime, live in India and to confront him with the violence of the Partition is an interesting one to say the least. But the combination of Jewish studies and postcolonial studies has proven to be a problematic one. In "Venetian Spaces: Old-New Literatures and the Ambivalent Uses of Jewish History", Bryan Cheyette explains why one strand of postcolonial theory actually resists to incorporate "Jewish history or the history of anti-Semitism into an understanding of a colonising Western modernity" (53). He shows that when it comes to the description of Jews in Europe, there is still a lot of confusion, by e.g. citing Robert Young who talks of "the history of anti-Semitism as a form of internal orientalism in the West, thereby simultaneously including and excluding it" from the

West (qtd. in Cheyette: 54), and Edward Said who agrees with Henry Louis Gates's vision of "a homogenous and dominant white 'Western Judeo-Christian' culture" (qtd. in Cheyette: 54). Because Said agrees with this statement of a homogenous Western Judeo-Christian culture, he does not address the non-Christian minorities within Europe, but, at the same time, Said describes the Jewish people in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876) as both "European prototypes" and as "curiously. . . 31 'Eastern'" (qtd. in Cheyette: 55). According to Cheyette, the reserved position of many postcolonial theorist towards the incorporation of a minority Jewish history, takes three main forms, namely: "in particular,

the history of individual Jews as part of the colonial project; the more general history of Zionism; and the contemporary cultural politics of many American Jews and African Americans” (55). I will only elaborate on the first two forms, because the third one is not relevant for our analysis

## II. Conclusion

The Job-like protagonist of the novel is a German Jew - the title's Baumgartner whose life unfolds with the inevitability of a Greek tragedy, plummeting him through several hells. He manages to flee from Nazi Germany and lands up in the pre-partition and pre-famine world of frivolous Calcutta. It is the Calcutta of “wealthy race-going Marwari” businessmen. The Cabaret Calcutta of Three Hundred and Prince's with all the Shanghai Lilys and straw blonde Lolas who have danced their way through the steamy ports of South East Asia, to anchor here. But the new world is no better: the old world is snapping at its heels; nemesis travels faster now. The war drums resound in India: Baumgartner becomes one of those “ants”-the internment camp a microcosm of Germany, with the Jews dominated and humiliated by the Aryan hut-fathers of the camp, in alliance with the British camp guards. The next descent takes Baumgartner to the ‘black, back streets’ of a devastated Calcutta where the fate of his business associate and friend Habibullah, parallels his own, and that of the fleeing Jew of Europe: “Every night they set some Muslim house on fire, stab some Muslim in the street, rob him too... they are driving us out,” says Habibullah. And the next: the treacherous back streets of Bombay, just behind the Taj Hotel where, now mockingly called *Billewallah Pagal*, he lives in abysmal filth in the company of a growing family of ailing stray cats. Each day he goes out with a plastic bag to Irani restaurants to scrounge for scraps of food to feed his cats, to the disdain of even his slum-dweller neighbours.

And it is in these lower if not lowest depths that he meets his nemesis: the Nordic-looking German junkie: “That fair hair, that peeled flesh it was a certain type that Baumgartner had escaped, forgotten. Then why had this boy to come after him, in lederhosen, in marching boots striding over the mountains to the sound of the Wander vogels Lied? The Lieder and the campfire. The campfire and the beer. The beer and the yodelling. The yodelling and the marching. The marching and the shooting. The shooting and the killing. The killing and the killing and the killing.”

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