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Diasporic History and Transnational Networks in Anita Desai's *Baumgartner's Bombay*

Abstract I: *Baumgartner's Bombay* di Anita Desai adotta la prospettiva di un ebreo tedesco scampato allo sterminio nazista e di un'ex cabarettista per collegare le storie di India e Germania. Quest'articolo esamina come questi personaggi – testimoni di una molteplicità di storie e ricettacoli di una varietà di istanze culturali – diano vita ad una rete diasporica di connessioni che smantella la solidità della storia ufficiale e dà un senso alla desolata esperienza dell'esilio.

Abstract II: Anita Desai's *Baumgartner's Bombay* adopts the perspective of a German Jewish Holocaust survivor and of a former cabaret performer to connect the histories of Germany and India. This paper examines how these characters – witnesses to a multiplicity of stories and receptacles of a variety of cultural instances – engender a diasporic network that dismantles the solidity of official history and grants a meaning to the desolate experience of exile.

Diaspora and exile are undoubtedly ambivalent and controversial conditions. As Edward Said claims, the experience of exile, at least within the “large, impersonal setting” of the mass displacements of the contemporary age, is hardly ever romantic or enriching, and cannot be conceived as “beneficially humanistic” (Said 2000: 173) without banalising the havoc it wrecks on people. However, even with these premises, Said acknowledges that exile does maintain some beneficial traits. As he explains, “most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that – to borrow a phrase from music – is *contrapuntal*” (Said 2000: 186). This contrapuntal vision, the potential to juxtapose different worlds, enabling people to establish unexpected connections, is arguably *the* redeeming feature of diasporic experiences. As a case in point, Anita Desai's 1988 novel *Baumgartner's Bombay* explores precisely this tangle of ambiguities.

The novel tells the story of a German Jewish Holocaust survivor, Hugo Baumgartner, who is forced to escape to India to survive Nazi persecution, leaving his mother behind. When World War II breaks out, he is arrested by the British and interned as a “hostile alien”. He is released at the end of the war, in time to see Calcutta devastated by Partition.

After collecting a packet of postcards from his mother – from which he understands that she was brought to a concentration camp and murdered – he seeks shelter in Bombay, where he spends the rest of his life, his only friend being Lotte, a gin-addicted former cabaret girl he had met in his early days in India. Hugo is ultimately killed by a drug-crazed hippie, Kurt. The novel ends with Lotte in her flat, contemplating Hugo's postcards, which she has managed to get hold of.

Desai's two previous novels – *Clear Light of Day* (1980) and *In Custody* (1984) – tackled the consequences of Partition in Delhi and the crisis of Urdu culture in postcolonial India. *Baumgartner's Bombay*, seemingly a radical thematic shift, is actually a consistent development of these concerns. As Aamir Mufti claims, the Jewish question in Europe represented the inception of "set of paradigmatic narratives, conceptual frameworks, motifs, and formal relationships concerned with the very question of minority existence, which [were] then disseminated globally" (Mufti 2007: 2). Its general features were re-enacted within the debate on the role of Muslims in India. There is, therefore, a coherent pattern linking *Baumgartner's Bombay* and the two novels that preceded it, as all these works, exposing interrelated discourses of marginalization, deal with minorities and individuals assaulted by history. In *Baumgartner's Bombay*, the networks of oppression that Desai had mapped within the Indian context are investigated in Europe, only to come back to India as the narrative unfolds.

The idea of connecting people and histories is arguably the leading principle of the novel. This paper explores how Desai employs diasporic and liminal figures like Hugo and Lotte to create a subversive counter-history. The two characters, emerging from backgrounds that include Jewish archetypes and Holocaust narrative tropes, and Weimar Republic cinematic and literary imagery, are conceived as witnesses to a multiplicity of stories and receptacles of a variety of cultural instances, which they carry from one continent to another. They thus engender a diasporic network that dismantles the solidity of national history and grants a meaning to the desolate experience of exile. I will therefore try to sketch the cultural and literary constellations from which Hugo and Lotte emerge and connect them with Desai's ensuing vision of history.

It would seem at first that the titular character, Hugo Baumgartner, is defined essentially by his Jewishness. As a Jew who travels from place to place, unable to find companionship, Hugo lends itself to a mythical reading as a Wandering Jew. More problematically, the helpless Hugo seemingly represents the stereotype of the Jew as a passive victim of Holocaust violence. Hugo's death at the hands of Kurt, which he somehow foresees but does little to prevent, might be taken as a proof that Desai frames her character as absorbed within a victim identity. Desai, however, insisted that she had no intention of "[feeding] the myth of the passive Jew who walked willingly into the internment camps, a willing victim of Hitlerism" (Demas Bliss & Desai 1988: 523), and that "Hugo is not a representative of the Jewish race to me but of the human race, of displaced

and dispossessed people and tribes all over the world" (Demas Bliss & Desai 1988: 523).

The idea of Hugo as a universal symbol of human suffering makes sense especially if we consider Desai's attempt to focus on an international – and not merely Indian – panorama of oppression. Desai's humanism, however, is rooted in the historical specificity of the settings she deploys. In Alex Stähler's words, "the Indian setting is relevant in that it allows Desai to point out affinities between the brittle realities in this country by comparison with the German backdrop" (Stähler 2010: 85). Desai's "associative style" (Stähler 2010: 87) exposes her character to a multiplicity of different, but not random, histories, and connects faraway cultural spaces through an ethical effort of imagination, bringing together the pieces of a complex transnational puzzle.

This conception of overlapping histories is consistent with the origins of Hugo as a character. Desai mentions two main sources for Hugo. The first one is her mother, a German expatriate. Desai states that "all the material for [the Berlin chapter] comes from the stories my mother would tell me of her childhood in Berlin [...]. It was an effort to reconstruct the world of her childhood in pre-World War II Germany" (Demas Bliss & Desai 1988: 526). However, the opportunity to integrate this background within an Indian narrative came through an Austrian Jew living in Bombay. As Desai recounts:

I knew someone who knew him, who used to go to the races with him [...]. When he died [...] my friend was asked to go through his belongings and dispose of them. He brought me a packet of letters to read; they were written in German, and he wanted to know if they were important. They were not; they said very little, simply contained everyday questions and were filled with endearments [...]. These letters were all stamped with the same number. Later I read that Jews in concentration camps during the holocaust were allowed to write a certain number of letters, during the early years at least. These letters were stamped with the numbers they bore in the camps. Only then did I realize what that number had meant. I did not know this man's history or anything about his past. I needed to invent one (Desai & Pandit 1995: 155–156).

Desai realized that she could provide the man with the background borrowed from her mother. The two stories were hence re-imagined as one in the character of Hugo, who allows them to interact and become mutually illuminating, to acquire a meaning they did not have by themselves. Filling the blank spaces of the story of the Austrian Jew, Desai triggered the interaction between the silenced stories of Germany and India.

Desai highlights analogies between periods of German and Indian history, such as between the last years of the Weimar Republic and the Indian Partition. As a witness to both, Hugo is the one who connects the memories of these instances of violence. The Nazi attacks in Berlin during the *Kristallnacht* are described in similar terms as the Great Calcutta Killing, which Hugo witnesses years later: in both scenes Hugo is woken up by

horrifying screams, and in both scenes the characters watch the enactment of violence from a window, at very relative safety distance. Desai's mirroring histories recount also subtler instances of violence. One is the gradual dispossession, in concrete terms, of minorities, and their resulting psychological devastation. In Germany, the protagonist of the manoeuvre is the businessman Pfuehl, that exploits the breakdown of Hugo's father to take over his business. Despite the gentle façade, Pfuehl is relentless and ruthless in his psychological pressure on Herr Baumgartner, contributing to the latter's suicide. On the other hand, the situation of Habibullah, Hugo's Muslim acquaintance, compelled to leave Calcutta due to the Partition riots, is not too different. When Hugo meets him, he is being forced to sell all his goods for a fraction of their value to a Marwari trader, who is probably behaving like Pfuehl. However the two episodes are not symmetric, but tackle the issue from two different perspectives – the former shows the schemes of the perpetrator, the latter the plight of the victim. Desai creates complementary situations that Hugo's peripheral vision brings together, filling the gaps of the two fragmented narratives.

Desai knows that the way of the world is not to mix up different national histories. Such awareness is best articulated when Hugo hears of the activities of the Indian National Army, a nationalist formation who tried, during the World War II, to overthrow the British rule with the help of the Japanese army. The discovery of this further internal front grants Hugo an insight on the nature of conflict and history:

His war was not their war. And they had had their own war. War within war within war. Everyone engaged in a separate war, and each war opposed to another war. If they could be kept separate, chaos would be averted. Or so they seemed to think, ignoring the fact that chaos was already upon them. [...] A great web in which each one was trapped, a nightmare from which one could not emerge (Desai 2007: 206).

Hugo understands that even if we follow a single thread of history we ultimately remain trapped in the 'great web'. Desai seems to suggest that, since this entanglement is inevitable, it may be worthwhile to actively try to follow multiple historical trajectories. Consistently, her protagonist becomes a receptacle of stories, which are merged within one overly complicated life. It is precisely Hugo's marginality that allows him to bring a valuable insight into the situations he lives in. Desai's strategy consists in "selecting out of the edges [...] of Baumgartner's failing vision slivers of urban decrepitude" (Belliappa 2008: 349), which however, once connected, emerge from the nightmare of history as meaningful.

The other character that plays a similar role is Lotte, the former cabaret performer. Her real name, Lotte, is connected, in a German context, with the angelic female figure of Goethe's *Werther*. Lotte's stage names, instead, recall icons of Weimar Republic culture. In Germany she is known as Lulu, in India she is known as Lola. Lulu is the character created

by Frank Wedekind for the diptych of plays *Erdgeist* (1895) and *Die Büchse der Pandora* (1904), focused on the arch femme fatale Lulu, who, in a part of the play, works precisely as a vaudeville artist. The plays are the basis for the iconic Weimar film *Die Büchse der Pandora* (1929), directed by G. W. Pabst and starring Louise Brooks. Lola-Lola, on the other hand, is the cynical cabaret singer played by Marlene Dietrich in another classic Weimar film, Josef von Sternberg's *Der Blaue Engel* (1930), based on Heinrich Mann's novel *Professor Unrat* (1905).

Lotte, therefore, brings along a significant historical and cultural density. She is an almost parodic version of the bewitching Lulu/Brooks and Lola-Lola/Dietrich. In particular, in certain aspects, Desai may have created Lotte as a downfallen Marlene Dietrich. When we first meet her, she sings a clumsy rendition of 'Lili Marlene', Dietrich's signature song. Both Dietrich and Lotte are expatriates – with the difference that Dietrich's life ended in a fancy flat in Paris. She too, moreover, had significant problems with alcohol. Most importantly, their legs – Dietrich was well-known for her magnificent legs, which, however, as she grew older, suffered from severe circulation problems (see Bach 2011). Unsurprisingly, the first detail we get to know about Lotte is that she is escaping from the flat of the recently murdered Hugo "at [...] a speed no one would have thought possible on those red heels that were no longer firm but wobbled drunkenly under the weight of her thick, purple-veined legs" (Desai 2007: 7, my italics).

Another literary connection that may illuminate Lotte's role within the novel, emerging once again, from late Weimar period, is Sally Bowles, a character created by Christopher Isherwood in his short story 'Sally Bowles' (1939), part of the collection *Goodbye to Berlin*. The character – best known through *Cabaret* (1972), the film adaptation of Isherwood's story, in which she was played by Liza Minnelli – is a would-be actress who sings in a night club, leading a bohemian life in the Berlin of the early '30s. Sally is particularly close to Lotte as regards some personality traits and their role within the poetics of their respective works. Both are self-assured, decadent characters, with a tendency towards self-delusion. Most importantly, both are unaware of the historical situation they live in, adopting a glamorous 'devil-may-care' attitude towards political or historical developments surrounding them.

In both *Goodbye to Berlin* and *Baumgartner's Bombay*, the cabaret girl seems to provide essentially a bohemian touch to the picture. Both characters, however, represent an important aspect of the poetics of the novels. Both works present history in a discontinuous pattern, focusing on the marginal viewpoint of their characters, revealing only at a given time the inexorable presence of historical forces. Isherwood's sketches map the gradual rise of Nazism in Weimar Germany. Short story after short story, Nazism occupies more and more space in the texture of the city and of the narrative, until it is accepted by the Berliners as a natural fact. Desai's global odyssey, on the other hand, depicts the constant attempt of exiles like Hugo and Lotte to run away from the centre of

things, only to be caught by history again, hitting them suddenly and violently like a landmine. She alternates moments of truce, like the first period of Hugo's and Lotte's life in India, and moments of elevated historical density, like the Partition riots.

Within this framework, the cabaret girl epitomizes the unawareness of ordinary people when they are confronted with history. Both Lotte and Sally, thinking it is possible to escape from history in a glittering flash of glamour, naively believe that historical turmoil had nothing to do with them. More specifically, Lotte, mimicking the style of Weimar cabaret, vaudeville and cinema, brings the typically late-Weimar idea of "dancing on a volcano" – Gustav Stresemann's phrase to describe the unthinking celebration on the verge of catastrophe we also read of in Isherwood – to the Indian context. Through Lotte, Desai establishes another historical bridge between pre-war Germany, about to experience the Nazi regime, and pre-independence India, about to experience Partition.

However Lotte endorses a different role at the end of the novel. When she returns to her flat with Hugo's postcards – in the scene that opens and ends the novel – she becomes the custodian of the diasporic history Desai has been sketching throughout the novel. In this sequence, Lotte confronts the postcards three times. Her first attempts leave her utterly overwhelmed, but, in the short passage that closes the novel, Lotte emerges as a more focused figure, ready to embrace the significance of the postcards:

By the teapot, on the table, she spread out the cards, sniffing at longer and longer intervals. She moved them about till they were all in orderly row before her. All. Each one stamped with the number: J 673/1. As if they provided her with clues to a puzzle, a meaning to the meaningless (Desai 2007: 273).

What is, then, the meaning of the postcards?

Firstly, the postcards – written by Hugo's mother from the concentration camp – represent the transnational and intricate structure of the novel, as their complex origins contain the whole of the novel's multiple narrative threads. They speak of Hugo's childhood in pre-war Germany. They bear the mark of Holocaust. They waited for Hugo while he was interned. They were part of his mourning in Calcutta, while Partition was taking place. They stayed with him for the rest of his life in Bombay. Finally, they survived Hugo's death. The postcards *are* Hugo's story, and therefore do contain the clues to give meaning to the meaningless, explaining the far-reaching reasons of Hugo's death in Bombay. Lotte, having perhaps understood this secret connection, becomes the custodian of Hugo's life.

Secondly, the novel opens with a quote from T.S. Eliot from the *Four Quartets*: "In my beginning is my end". The quotation refers to the structure of the novel, which begins with the final scene and closes with the reprise of that very scene. However, it also refers to the postcards: the letters of the Austrian Jew of Bombay that Desai had the chance to envision were the starting point for her experiments with imagination to fill the blanks of that

otherwise forgotten existence. The final image of *Baumgartner's Bombay* – Lotte, reading the postcards – represents the inception of the writing process of the novel itself. The postcards testify to the survival of a network, ranging from Berlin to Bombay, in the midst of the catastrophes of history.

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