

“In my Beginning is my End”:
Multidirectional Memory and the (Im)Possibility of Escaping the
Holocaust in Anita Desai’s *Baumgartner’s Bombay*

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Anita Desai’s novel *Baumgartner’s Bombay* (1988) makes evident its alliance with the determinist view of history according to which history repeats itself without allowing human agency to escape the occurrence of events. *Baumgartner’s Bombay* embodies this view by telling the story of Hugo Baumgartner, a man condemned to suffer the same destiny of exclusion and abuse all his life. My main aim is to demonstrate that, through this hybrid figure (German, Jewish, Indian), along with the circular structure of the novel and the repetitive use of images and metaphors evoking Otherness and alienation which this analysis discloses, Desai deploys the multidirectional model of memory, defined by Michael Rothberg as the overlap of individual and collective traumatic memories of different nations at different times. I conclude that Desai’s work exemplifies the way individual and collective Holocaust memories may be transposed to divergent traumatic events and conflicts, like those of the Partition and the British internment camps in India. Furthermore, it reveals how the examination of notions of Otherness and stereotypical identity formation can be helpful to understand the mechanisms that underlie the diverse episodes of genocide and trauma witnessed during the twentieth century.

Keywords: Holocaust; multidirectional memory; Postcolonialism; history; Anita Desai; Otherness

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La memoria multidireccional y la (im)posibilidad de escapar al
Holocausto en *Baumgartner’s Bombay* de Anita Desai

La novela de Anita Desai titulada *Baumgartner’s Bombay* (1988) muestra su alineación con un punto de vista determinista de la historia, según el cual la historia está condenada a repetirse

sin permitir que el ser humano intervenga a la hora de alterar el orden de los acontecimientos. *Baumgartner's Bombay* encarna esta perspectiva a través de la vida de Hugo Baumgartner, un hombre eternamente condenado a cargar con un destino ligado a la exclusión y al abuso. Mi principal objetivo es demostrar que, mediante este personaje híbrido (alemán, judío, indio), la estructura circular de la novela y el uso repetitivo de imágenes y metáforas evocando varias formas de alteridad y alienación que se examinarán en el análisis, Desai despliega un modelo de memoria multidireccional, definido por Michael Rothberg como la superposición de memorias colectivas e individuales de naciones muy diversas y acontecidas en momentos diferentes de la historia. Finalmente, se llega a la conclusión de que esta novela ejemplifica la manera en la que memorias del Holocausto, individuales y colectivas, pueden transponerse a hechos y conflictos traumáticos de índole muy diversa, como los relacionados con el proceso de partición en India y los campos de internamiento británicos en ese país; por otro lado, intento demostrar que el estudio del fenómeno de la alteridad y la formación estereotipada de la identidad puede ayudarnos a entender los mecanismos que subyacen a episodios diversos de horror, genocidio y trauma que han definido al siglo veinte.

Palabras clave: Holocausto; memoria multidireccional; postcolonialismo; historia; Anita Desai; alteridad

I. THE “HOLOCAUST METAPHOR” AND THE POSTCOLONIAL DEBATE

More than sixty years have passed since Theodor Adorno contended that writing poetry after Auschwitz was barbaric ([1949] 1997).¹ This statement reflected the mainstream view held after the Second World War that the only way to represent the horror of the Holocaust was silence. Over time the situation completely changed, though, and this initial advocacy of silence has given way to diverse representations of the Holocaust. From the 1980s to the present, many testimonies of Holocaust survivors have been collected in written, oral and visual forms. The plight of survivors and later generations has also been narrated in diverse literary forms. This upsurge of representations, which includes the work of writers who did not experience the Holocaust first-hand, runs parallel to the new perspective in the humanities evident since the 1990s, when the need to theorise the representation of the Holocaust in fictional discursive practices gave rise to the field of Trauma Studies. This discourse has greatly impacted on our understanding of individual and collective trauma and explains the massive surge in literary works addressing individual and collective traumatic events. In fact, we have witnessed a kind of commodification of trauma as a result of the testimonial boom that contemporary culture has experienced since the turn of the millennium (Luckhurst 2003, 28).

In the case of the Holocaust, this commodification has been accompanied by its increasing “metaphorisation” to allude to other collective traumatic episodes of abuse and extermination suffered by different minority groups over the course of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century. Indeed, I would concur with Efraim Sicher when he argues that this boom in the Holocaust novel “cannot be divorced from apocalyptic visions of millennial mass death, the cult of violence, and the appropriation of the Holocaust as a metaphor for universal suffering by emerging minority groups” (2005, xvii). Stef Craps and Michael Rothberg confirm this view when they argue that “the Holocaust has escaped its spatial and temporal particularism to emerge as a common moral touchstone in the wake of the Cold War, and can thus provide the basis for an emergent universal human-rights regime” (2011, 17-18). This tendency to connect the Holocaust to other traumatic collective events, making it part of our societies’ collective consciousness, contradicts the theories about its uniqueness and unrepresentability. As explained by Lawrence L. Langer (2000, xv), these ideas were the result of humankind’s incapacity to face the horror of the Nazi genocide; the special ethical limitations imposed on the representation of the Holocaust (LaCapra 2001, 11); and the dangers of trivialisation that threaten any artistic depiction of this event (Hartman [1996] 2002, 36). Due to its extreme nature, Michael Rothberg explains that the Holocaust has “come to be understood in the popular imagination, especially in Europe, Israel, and North America, as [a] unique, *sui generis* event”

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(2009, 8). In Dominick LaCapra's view, the uniqueness of the Holocaust draws on the fact that it transgressed a certain limit and thus became a liminal experience (2001, 160). These contemporary scholars have pointed to the dangers of this line of thought as it could easily serve identity politics and even promote competition for the "first place in victimhood" (159). This article will show my agreement with these critics on the idea that placing the Holocaust at the centre of trauma and memory discourse has contributed to drawing attention away from other collective traumatic events.

Moreover, the ideas mentioned above have become very relevant to postcolonial discourse. There has been a recent broadening in the field, from the national to the transnational level, meaning that traumatic colonial histories have to be "considered in relation to traumatic metropolitan or First World histories for trauma studies to have any hope of redeeming its promise of ethical effectiveness" (Craps 2013, 72). In fact, the gap between Holocaust Studies and Postcolonialism has been addressed by critics who object to the traditional academic insistence on analysing the Holocaust and colonialism separately, given that both phenomena exemplify the human tendency to reject the Other (Cheyette 2009, 13-20). Theorists such as Hannah Arendt, Aimé Césaire and W.E.B. Du Bois broke new ground when pointing out the continuities between the history of European Jews and the history of European colonialism. Their ideas have inspired the adoption of the contemporary comparative cross-cultural approach to Genocide Studies in historiography and literary and cultural studies.² In his seminal book, Rothberg (2009) has built on this large body of theoretical work and devised a multidirectional model of memory that seeks points of contact between the memories of the Holocaust and colonialism. His theories underlie this article as they provide the perfect framework to understand Anita Desai's *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988). Taking this approach, Desai can be connected to other contemporary writers who have used the "Holocaust metaphor" in order to produce new multidirectional readings of some of the most traumatic events of the last century, such as Caryl Phillips in *Higher Ground* (1989) and *The Nature of Blood* (1997), Gish Jen in *Mona in The Promised Land* (1996), Nancy Huston in *The Mark of the Angel* (1999), W. G. Sebald in *Austerlitz* (2001) and Richard Power in *The Time of Our Singing* (2003).

I will therefore critically analyse Desai's *Baumgartner's Bombay* in order to demonstrate that it should be considered a convincing instance of how individual and collective Holocaust memories can be transposed to divergent traumatic historical episodes, reinforcing this cultural and philosophical trend that sees the Holocaust as a metaphor for the suffering undergone by other groups throughout the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. In order to do so, I will start by questioning the conflictive relationship between Jewishness and Otherness exposed throughout the novel. This will lead me to challenge some previous assumptions about the representation of the Jewish question

² With key representatives in historiography such as Dirk Moses, David Moshman, Jacques Semelin, Dan Stone, as well as in literary and cultural studies, including Michael Rothberg, Stef Craps, Bryan Cheyette, Max Silverman, Paul Gilroy and Robert Eaglestone.

in Desai's work and to identify the universal and deterministic outlook on history—considering both its negative and positive connotations—fostered by *Baumgartner's Bombay*. Desai's work will demonstrate that current writers are increasingly aware of the need to establish multidirectional and cross-cultural connections in order to leave behind exclusively Western visions of genocide and trauma, and to open up to Eastern conceptions through the “Holocaust metaphor,” encouraging more universal and productive visions of human suffering and conflict.

2. *BAUMGARTNER'S BOMBAY* IN CONTEXT

Indian novelist Anita Desai was born in Old Delhi in 1937. The daughter of a German mother and an Indian father, she grew up in New Delhi speaking German at home and Hindi outside, while at school she learnt English—the language that became her literary tongue. Her first published novel was *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) and, since then, she has published several novels, children's books and short stories, a number of which have won various literary awards. Desai has been considered “part of a new literary tradition of Indian writing in English, which dates back only to the 30s and 40s” (Daiya 2006, 27). Generally speaking, her works are characterised by “finely crafted language, poetic imagery, a strong sense of place, and complex, interwoven characters” (Miller 2001, 81) and most of them deal with the inner struggles of contemporary Indian characters at the same time as vividly depicting the socio-cultural changes that affected their country during the second half of the twentieth century. In addition, she has addressed such noteworthy topics as German anti-Semitism, the demise of Indian traditions and the Western stereotypical views of the East, thus combining the portrayal of the individual with contemporary relevant historical events.

Focusing on *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988), a variety of interpretations have been put forward by critics, and Desai has not escaped the controversy surrounding writers who deal with historical issues of such ethical complexity as the Holocaust in their fictional creations (Lang 1988, 38; Langer 2000, xv). As Axel Stähler has explained, the fact that this novel tackling the Holocaust was written by an Indian author with German roots, and that she did so from a fairly innovative perspective turned this novel into “a contested art of fiction” (2010, 76). This reaction is related to the “proprietary” attitudes that dismiss Holocaust fiction written by non-Jewish writers who did not go through the Holocaust (Vice 2000, 4). Moreover, Desai has been criticised by several postcolonial critics, such as Ketaki Kushari Dyson (1989, 29-30), Ashok Chandwani (1988, 16), Tony Simoes Da Silva (1997, 67-70) and Patrick C. Hogan (2004, 31-52), for her maintenance of Western/Eastern stereotypical dichotomies whereby Westerners see the postcolonial subject as the inferior Other, endorsing a Eurocentric colonialist view and depicting India as a uniform and simple entity. However, more recent critical voices have remarked that Desai's work should be read as an innovative postcolonial narrative showing the heterogeneous experiences of postcolonial subjects (Parekh

2006, 189). Also, Stähler has objected to this previous negative criticism on the novel, arguing that it goes beyond established categorisations of what should be considered postcolonial and what Holocaust literature (2010, 77). Indeed, this view was shared by Bryan Cheyette who had previously praised Desai's novel for "engaging productively with Jewish history" in relation to her own Indian history (2000, 59). This article is based on these reinterpretations, which praise the novel for establishing a connection between the horror caused by European wars and the devastation of India during and after partition. But my study attempts to offer an invigorated perspective by reading it through the lens of the "Holocaust metaphor." This will allow me to provide Desai's novel with a more universal meaning, interrogate the ideological connotations behind its hybrid Jewish protagonist, and promote the idea that marginalisation and abuse are not reserved for a single ethnic group, but are rather part of the lives of many minorities around the world.

Even before the novel begins these premises are revealed through the epigraph: "In my beginning is my end. In succession / Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended, / Are removed, destroyed, restored," quoting T. S. Eliot's famous second section of *The Four Quartets*, "East Coker" ([1909-1935] 1963).³ Eliot's playful reference to the words uttered by Mary Queen of Scots before she was beheaded points to a cyclical view of history according to which civilisations are predestined to decay, be rebuilt and destroyed time and again without allowing human agency to alter this mechanism. In this passage, Eliot showed his pessimistic view of the possibility of regenerating European society after the First World War and his disillusionment with humankind. These words are indeed well chosen, as one of the main messages transmitted by Desai's novel is consistent with the idea that history will be repeated continuously, with no possibility that any change can be wrought by human agency. The story of Hugo Baumgartner embodies this view of history, as he is fated to suffer the same experience of exclusion over and over during his life. Being of German-Jewish origin, he has to flee Berlin as a child—following the suicide of his traumatised father, and leaving behind his mother who, as Hugo will discover, dies in a concentration camp during the Holocaust—and migrate to India to escape from Nazism. Once there, he is identified as a German and as a result is sent to a British internment camp. Released from this camp six years later, he has to endure the war caused by the partition of India in the city of Calcutta before finally moving to Bombay, where he lives as an outcast until he is murdered by a young German drug-addict whom he has sheltered in his house. As the writer herself has declared, this fictional story originated from the true story of an Austrian-Jew she had met in Bombay. When this man died of natural causes, she read through a package of letters in German among his personal effects, only later realising that they came "from a concentration camp. They had been so empty of information

³ All the references to the novel are taken from Anita Desai, *Baumgartner's Bombay* (London: Vintage, 1998), originally published in Great Britain by William Heinemann in 1988.

that [she] had not realized that earlier” (quoted in Stähler 2010, 78). The fragmented meaning of these letters urged Desai to imbue them with a story of their own which could voice the suffering that they hid.

The novel starts with a flash-forward to the final episode, when Hugo's friend, Lotte, has discovered his murder. This circular structure is reinforced by the fact that the narration is divided, with odd numbered chapters recounting the wanderings of Hugo during the last day of his life, and even chapters telling the full story of the main character's life from his childhood in Germany to his final days in Bombay. The even chapters adopt the form of flashbacks prompted by the memories stirred up by the main character in the preceding odd chapter. The past and the present narratives come together in the last chapter, when Lotte's encounter with Hugo's death fuses the two time dimensions into the present. In this way, just as Lotte is portrayed trying to order the letters of Baumgartner's mother,⁴ Desai forces readers to complete the puzzle of the main character's life by jumping between the past and the present, a present which is determined from the first pages. Regarding the construction of the narrative voice, the heterodiegetic extradiegetic narrator enters the main character's consciousness, portraying his inner stream of thoughts, thanks to the use of techniques such as interior monologues, free indirect style and free association of ideas. These literary techniques turn Hugo into the main focaliser of the action, the lens through which readers see the disturbing world depicted in the novel, but a lens which may be distorted as he is not fully aware of the historical events that surround him and he never acquires a voice of his own, remaining a passive object, both in history and in his personal life.

3. THE JEW, THE ETERNAL *FIRANGHI*?

If we analyse the character of Hugo Baumgartner with reference to the traditional criticism on Jewish identity, the stereotype of the Jew as the eternal wanderer looking for a homeland can be identified. As I have argued elsewhere, the Jewish community has traditionally built their identity upon their own nature as a diasporic people, i.e., immigration and foreignness are at the core of their sense of community (Pellicer-Ortín 2015, 169-170). This alien status is continuously highlighted in the description of Desai's main character. From the initial flash-forward to the last day of his life in Bombay Hugo appears as the stereotypical foreigner rejected by any society into which he has tried to settle. At the beginning of the story, the external narrator has access to Hugo's stream-of-consciousness by using free indirect discourse as follows: “How oriental, how exotic, Baumgartner used to think, smiling the abashed smile of one

⁴ It can be argued that the letters Baumgartner received from her mother when she was imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp act as a relevant narrative device in the novel. Based on a real story that called Desai's attention, Lotte's reading and attempt of understanding their meaning open and close the narration, emphasising the circularity of the narrative and the impossibility of comprehending both the true nature of the Holocaust and the ill-fated life of the protagonist that will be fostered throughout the novel.

who did not belong, [...] he had lived in this land for fifty years [...] Yet the eyes of the people who passed by glanced at him who was still strange and unfamiliar to them, and all said: *Firanghi*, foreigner” (Desai [1988] 1998, 19; emphasis in the original). And, again, in the last pages of the book he is portrayed as a “shabby, dirty, white man, *firanghi*, unwanted. *Raus*, Baumgartner, *raus*” (190; emphasis in the original). Right from the start, he does not see himself as part of Bombay. He assumes that isolation is something natural and even celebrates it in his thoughts: “he was relieved too, relieved not to join the crowd, the traffic, but to amble alone into the lanes and alleys that made off from the main road” (9). Moreover, the lack of a first-person voice to disclose his feelings and thoughts highlights his lack of belonging and the passivity with which he confronts his life. The next question must therefore be: to what extent are this isolation and lack of agency part of his Jewishness?

According to the great number of works aiming to define the concept of Jewishness, the main feature of Jewish identity has always been its ambiguity. As David Brauner argues: “For some, [...] Jewishness is an innate, inalienable property, for others a learned tradition; for some, a belief system, for others a cultural construct; for some a race, for others a religion; for some a nationality, for others a sensibility; for some a historical legacy, for others a metaphysical state” (2001, 3). In general, for Western societies, Jews have represented the Other that threatens their social order, defined in opposition to the Western rational mind. Westerners have defined themselves in contrast to the Jews; despising them because they feared them as the unknown, and because of their need to create mental structures which could enable them to assimilate the massive migration of Eastern Jews into Europe and North America.

In Baumgartner’s case, belonging to a Jewish family in the Germany of the 1930s, he feels a variety of sensations related to the German exclusion of Jews. At first, as a child he experiences the common Jewish feeling of self-hatred and shame, and he neglects his Jewish origins in his German school (Gilman 1986). This may be seen when he asks his mother “Why don’t you look like the other mothers?” (Desai [1988] 1998, 33); and in the episode when he cannot understand Christmas traditions, which leads him to feel ashamed of his lack of belonging (36). However, the children of the German-Jewish community also tease him about the shape of his nose (37-38), which does not look as sharp as the distinctive Jewish nose. All these aspects turn little Hugo into an insecure child who is unable to define his true self, as depicted in the following episode: “mystifying and alarming were the three-piece mirrors that sat on the dressing tables and showed *you* unfamiliar aspects of *your* head, turning *you* into a stranger before *your* own eyes as *you* slowly rotated to find the recognisable” (26; my emphasis). The mirror incident becomes very relevant at this stage of the narration. It appears as a metaphor for the complex sense of identity that little Baumgartner has of himself: not completely German, not completely Jewish, he sees his identity as made of fragments that do not fit together. And, in addition to this, the use of the pronoun “you” contrasts with the predominance of the third-person pronoun throughout the novel, showing

that at this early moment in the protagonist's life there is still some possibility of him developing his personality more consciously and actively, identifying himself, as he does, with the "I" in the mirror without the need of an external narrator that recognises him from the outside.

As the story goes on, after Hugo's father has committed suicide and his mother has decided to stay in Germany, India becomes Hugo's Promised Land (55). Before going there, he spends a week in Venice, the place where he really starts wondering about the meaning of his Jewishness (82); a place which is defined as: "the East, and yet it was Europe too; it was that magic boundary where the two met and blended, and for those seven days Hugo had been part of their union" (63). It is in Venice where, even though he is not even an adult yet, he realises that he belongs to that mysterious world of non-belonging. And in Venice this non-belonging is not reproved, quite the opposite, words like "magic" and "union" reveal its multifarious possibilities. However, as soon as he gets to India, this hope for positive self-development disappears. Feelings of hostility towards him are observed again; for example, people do not want to help him find the directions to the correct Taj Hotel because of his different colour and language (85-86). In addition, since the Second World War breaks out as he arrives in Calcutta, he is imprisoned in a British internment camp as an "enemy alien" (103), without his condition as a Jewish refugee being taken into account. This event reverses the situation endured in Germany, where he was excluded for not being a pure German. Once he is liberated from the camp, he moves to Bombay, the place where he becomes an outcast, the man who is finally "accepting—but not accepted [...] In Germany he had been defined as dark—his darkness had marked him as a Jew, *der Jude*. In India he was fair—and that marked him the *firanghi*. In both lands, the unacceptable" (20).

Hugo's view of himself as a *firanghi* exemplifies the feelings encountered by Jews across history, as well as the impossibility the inhabitants of their adoptive lands have in relating to them on egalitarian terms. As Kenneth Surin explains, the Jewish exile has differed from all other diasporic movements. It has had very different consequences and so, its exiles have received a very different treatment from other racial and cultural minorities (1999, 276). The foreign features represented by Baumgartner throughout the novel bring to mind Jean-François Lyotard's description of "the jews" in Europe, where they have always been expelled or exterminated on the grounds of their alien status ([1988] 1990, 47). Moreover, Lyotard and other theorists such as Hannah Arendt have pointed out that this is not only a status that Western civilisation has assigned to the Jews, but one that Jews themselves have incorporated into their own identity (Arendt [1978] 2005, 2-3), partly through the creation of their "myth of origins," which provides them with messianic hope for the Promised Land, and offers some explanation for their errant nature. In fact, I would contend that this mythical suffering undergone by the Jewish communities is one of the factors that have contributed to turning the Holocaust into "an organizing metaphor about the Jewish experience of reality in the 20th century and timelessly" (Stein 1984, 6-7).

The text, however, does not present Baumgartner as a very religious Jew; on the contrary, as a child, he does not understand the meaning of being a Jew (Desai [1988] 1998, 37-38) and, as an adult, he is unable to pray when he finds out about his mother's death (165). Explaining the process of identity formation, Stuart Hall asserted that "we should think of identity as a production, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (1997, 225)—a process that is wisely illustrated in the mirror episode when Baumgartner struggles to obtain a complete view of himself. Hall's explanation matches Hugo's incapacity to actively engage with the identity assigned to him, just as he is unable to identify his own self with the distorted image projected in the mirror, revealing his individuality to be a construction formed by different socio-political discourses that have nothing to do with his individual choices. According to Hall, there are two models of cultural identity: the first defines it as a culture shared by a collective, while the second focuses on the differences between groups. As has been demonstrated thus far, it is this second type of identity, based on the differences between Self (the Germans, the British, the Indians) and Other (Hugo), which is constructed in *Baumgartner's Bombay*. The novel shows that this process does not only happen in Europe but also in the East. The main character embodies Lyotard's idea of "the jew," understood as the Other in the definition both of the European and the Oriental subject. By transposing this Otherness to the Indian context, Desai reproduces the archetypal nature of Jewishness, which characterises many Holocaust writings, and she personifies the myth of the Wandering Jew as the quintessential symbol of Otherness in order to allude to the universal human capacity to create Others.

The term Other was widely theorised by postcolonial scholars such as Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha and Stuart Hall to refer to the process by which Western societies have justified the subordination exerted upon foreign societies which challenged their *status quo*. Hall defined the Others as "people who are in any way significantly different from the majority—they rather than us—[and they] are frequently exposed to this binary form of representation" (1997, 229). The process of identity formation observed in Baumgartner exemplifies the way this stereotyping works, reducing "people to a few, simple, essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by Nature" (257) and denying the subject the possibility of recognising and accepting the jumbled shades forming his personality. Thus, for me, the fact that Desai's main character has become the object of stereotyping wherever he has settled underlines that this is a universal practice. As Sander L. Gilman has explained: "the stereotype is the perpetuation of a needed sense of difference, a difference between the self and the object, which in the creation of stereotypical mental representations becomes the 'Other'" (1991, 13). Consequently, one of the main messages in this novel would be that this deeply-rooted human practice has caused most of the genocides of the twentieth century. In fact, my argument may be supported by the author's explanation that the figure of Baumgartner is not aimed at dealing with the Jewish Question but at representing the whole human condition (Desai 1988, 522).

4. "BOMBAY WHICH BECAME, BY MAGIC, THE BERLIN OF THIRTY YEARS AGO": GENOCIDE, OTHERNESS AND MULTIDIRECTIONALITY

The universal alienation embodied by Baumgartner is also supported by the multidirectional model of memory organising the narrative, which provides some clues to understand the deepest meaning of this Jewish *firangbi*. Michael Rothberg developed the concept of multidirectional memory "against the framework that understands collective memory as *competitive* memory," thus suggesting that we consider memory "subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing and borrowing; as productive and not privative" (2009, 3; emphasis in the original). Although I agree with those scholars who posit the Holocaust as a caesura in our understanding of history (Lifton 1968, 479), my analysis accords with Rothberg's view that "minority and colonial histories challenged the uniqueness of the Holocaust and fostered research into other histories of extreme violence, ethnic cleansing, and genocide" (2009, 8). The multidirectional model of memory reveals the connections between diverse traumatic events, for all of them have caused suffering to minority social groups. Multidirectional memory "cuts across genres, national contexts, periods, and cultural traditions" and, although it focuses on collective and historical memories, it is never separated from individual stories (14-18). Again, this comparative perspective supports the idea that all forms of genocide are the final manifestation of a process of identity formation that promotes the idea of Otherness, one which is artificially constructed in the public sphere, defining the social attitudes, the policies and the ideologies that sustain societies. Endorsing this line of thought, Rothberg sees clear connections between the discourse of Holocaust and Postcolonial Studies (22-23); connections which are noticeably established in Desai's novel.

In the first place, just as Rothberg claims for the connections between the European Holocaust and the Postcolonial experiences of suffering, Desai creates overt links between the Nazi Holocaust in Germany and the disastrous effects of colonialism in India, leading to the conflict of Partition, by representing a character that becomes a victim of both. The structure of the novel and the arrangement of chapters is multidirectional in itself, linking the main character's current state as an outcast in Bombay to his life in Germany, Venice, the British camps and Calcutta, Desai anticipates Rothberg's model, given that she shows the experiences of marginalisation suffered by Hugo in Europe as a replica of those similar events he subsequently goes through in colonial and postcolonial India.

Secondly, there are instances in which ideologies that are reminiscent of those that led to the Holocaust can be partially observed in India, both before and after partition. For example, the character Farrokh, the owner of the Café de Paris in Bombay, shows the postcolonial subject's abhorrence of a particular kind of European. He rejects the German tourist Kurt, applying comparable principles—promoting Otherness as well as a binary model for the understanding of identity—to those according to which the German people looked down on the Jews, as he refers to him in this pejorative way: "this new race—men who remain children, like pygmies, dwarfs [...]. 'But what

is there inside all that big, strong flesh and bones? Hah? he queried threateningly. Anything there? No? You are right. Nothing. Empty. Hollow. Hah! ” (Desai [1988] 1998, 13). This discourse exposes the Indian prejudice towards the stereotype of the white Westerner looking for adventures and mysticism in Eastern countries like India—a quite common figure at the time when the novel was set. Farrokh’s vision of these Western people echoes the Westerners’ rejection of the Other that affected Hugo as a German-Jew in Germany. Thus, the narrative links two different historical moments by showing similar racist discourses of exclusion, based on stereotypes and prejudiced conceptions of the Other.

The multidirectional model of memory is also achieved thanks to the repetition of events throughout the narrative and the regular atmosphere of chaos that surrounds the main character. Desai uses Hugo to draw parallels between the Second World War in Europe, which he learns about while imprisoned in the Indian internment camp, with the partition of India, which takes place immediately afterwards (162). This endless repetition of armed conflicts makes Hugo come to the conclusion that “his war was not their war. And they 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” (173). These reflections go against the competitive model of memory: Baumgartner sees the war in India as part of the war in Germany; both conflicts, *all* conflicts, being part of the same universal war. He denies the pre-eminence of some armed conflicts over others and highlights that these two supposedly different conflicts cannot be separated. Even though they are taking place in opposite ends of the globe, they are part of the same human chaos. This is the global war that he mentions in the subsequent episode: “Baumgartner felt himself overtaken by yet another war of yet another people. Done with the global war, the colonial war, only to be plunged into a religious war” (180).

This repetition of events is also reinforced at the chronological level of the narrative. At times, some threatening circumstances which the characters have managed to avoid at an earlier point of the narrative reappear afterwards in a different place. For instance, Hugo’s father is released from the concentration camp of Dachau, but a similar death comes to him when he gases himself using a domestic oven some weeks later (49). Also, the camp Hugo flees from and the one where his mother dies reappear in the form of the British internment camps in India (103-135), which are described by referring to many images of imprisonment that construct the contemporary mainstream Holocaust imagery. For example, Hugo describes the camps as follows: “in the central internment camp in Ahmednagar where the ‘hostile aliens’ from all over the country were poured like ants from a closed fist into a bowl of dust, and swarmed there in a kind of frenzy, it became daily more clear that a system was being devised to screen them and find reasons to keep them in captivity” (106). Here, he focuses on the insignificant status assigned to the prisoners in the camps, equated to ants in captivity, and to the mechanisation of their imprisonment. Yet the camp also seems to become a kind of shelter where

dullness and plainness may save Baumgartner from the war outside. These feelings are rendered in this way: “his own life seemed hopelessly tangled and unsightly, symbolised aptly by the strands of barbed wire wrapped around the wooden posts and travelling in circles and double circles around the camp” (111). Although there are various differences between the representation of Nazi camps in contemporary Holocaust fictions (Sicher, 2005; Vice, 2000) and the depiction of the British camps in Desai’s novel, some connections can be made since the protagonist’s feelings of desolation are associated with the barbed wire—one of the most recurrent Holocaust symbols—which is, like his own life, circular, evoking disheartened and tedious feelings. By disclosing Baumgartner’s feelings of hopelessness and emphasising the “concentratory universe” of the camps, understood as places that cannot be comprehended by human reason due to their extraordinary nature (Rousset 1946), Desai deploys another instance of the multidirectional connections between Germany and India.

Finally, the recreation of Hugo’s stream of consciousness continually shows this multidirectional pattern. This can be clearly seen when he witnesses the murder of a boy in Calcutta, and that event makes him imagine his mother’s death (Desai [1988] 1998, 179); also, when he goes to the horse races in Bombay, which automatically takes him back to his childhood in Germany when he could not go to the races with his father, “here in Bombay which became, by magic, the Berlin of thirty years ago” (194). These examples show that the multilayered model of memory is not only performed at the structural, ideological and thematic level, but the main character’s consciousness also follows a multidirectional association of ideas in which some disturbing event in India forces him to recall and imagine other disturbing events that occurred in Germany.

All these aspects considered, I would argue that in *Baumgartner’s Bombay* Anita Desai has “successfully jumped worlds and juggled time” (Jain 1988, 96), supporting Rothberg’s tenet that “shared histories of racism, spatial segregation, genocide, diasporic displacement, cultural destruction, [...] provide the grounds for new forms of collectivity” (2009, 23). Forms which acknowledge the power of minor (hi) stories of separation and divergence like that presented by Desai. By juxtaposing the notion of traumatic multidirectional memories and the fact that Hugo embodies universal Otherness, the Jews are not the only ones who cannot escape the devastating consequences of racism and hatred, but it is humanity as a whole that is doomed to fall into repetitive episodes of hostility and violence.

5. “HERE THE WORLD FORCED ITS WAY IN WITHOUT BEING ASKED”: HISTORICAL DETERMINISM AND THE FAILED QUEST FOR BELONGING

The multidirectional model of memory deployed highlights the fact that traumatic collective events are happening every day and everywhere. However, it also points to a determinist view of history that goes back to the Hegelian interpretation of history,

i.e., the doctrine that posits the course of history as “determined by material or spiritual forces that are not open to human volition or change” (Saint-Andre [1996] 2017, n.p.). The philosophy of history elaborated by Georg Friedrich Hegel considered history as a process of constant progress directed by the concept of organic development towards a prescribed end, a dialectical process towards the triumphant end of history in which each successive historical movement emerges as a solution to the contradictions inherent in the preceding movement. In his seminal work *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel openly encouraged this determinism by arguing that world history only worked following the predetermined plan of providence ([1807] 1979). It is one of my claims that Desai’s novel exemplifies this view of history.

The circular structure of Hugo’s story contributes to this historical determinism: it ends and finishes with Lotte ordering the letters of Baumgartner’s mother “as if they provided her with clues to a puzzle, a meaning to the meaningless” (Desai [1988] 1998, 230)—a remark that ironically shows the impossibility of understanding the ending to Hugo’s life or that of his mother. The novel consistently shows the individual’s inability to alter the occurrence of events through Hugo’s consciousness. For instance, he elaborates these significant thoughts: “the *lunacy* of performing acts one *did not wish* to perform, living lives one *did not wish* to live, becoming what *one was not*. Always another will *opposed* to one’s own, always another fate, not the one of one’s *choice* or even making. A great *web* in which one was *trapped*” (173; my emphasis). Through the accumulation of verbs that indicate lack of agency as well as negative and contradictory expressions, Hugo reflects on how Partition is destroying Calcutta, and his ideas advocate the view that he, as an individual, is not free to determine his fate. History is depicted metaphorically as a web from which the individual cannot escape.

Furthermore, this view on history is manifest in Hugo as a protagonist who is a passive character unable to get involved in his historical context. History happens to/through him and he cannot react and alter the course of events. Several episodes substantiate this claim. For instance, while he is surrounded by the chaos of the war in Calcutta he is depicted as “struggling yet *static* in the crowd at the station” (90; my emphasis); and he is usually described as a voiceless man: “silence was his natural condition” (117). Also, the following passage shows his reaction after the German defeat in the Second World War: “he stood helplessly, only aware how *crushed* and *wrecked* and *wretched* a representative he was of victory. Couldn’t even victory appear in colours other than that of defeat? No. Defeat was *heaped on him*” (135; my emphasis). Again here, although the alliteration of suffocating sounds evokes the character’s abhorrence of violence and war, he remains unable to react after the Allied victory. Also, the use of the passive form underlines his role as an inactive agent to whom defeat has been assigned by invisible historical forces. This aspect is made clearer when the narrator says: “the life of Bombay which had been Baumgartner’s life for thirty years now—or, rather, the setting for his life; he had never actually entered it, never quite captured it; *damply*, *odorously*, *cacophonously* palpable as it was, it had been elusive still” (214; my emphasis).

According to these words, individuals like Baumgartner cannot interfere with the historical setting around them. Even though this setting is supposed to trigger one's senses and feelings, as the gathering of adverbs of manner shows; the only state that they can adopt is stillness, becoming puppets in a stage that they cannot alter.

This interpretation of the world is also supported by the various premonitions displayed in the narrative. In this sense, the initial racist discourse delivered by Farrokh—"it is now white man killing and robbing black man. And white man killing white man too" (Desai [1988] 1998, 16)—foretells the fatal ending of the novel. Moreover, just as the Hegelian philosophy considers history as a predetermined occurrence of events, Desai's novel harbours the view that once history is put into action there is nothing that can stop it. This can be seen in the following episode: "the trouble with such fascinating sights was their silence,⁵ their tedium, the endless repetition of forms and actions that blurred and turned into endless labour of human forms—bent, driven into black caves from which they did not re-emerge. Nacht und Nebel. Night and Fog. Into which, once cast, there was no return" (119). This passage includes a deep reflection on general history and, more particularly, on Nazism. These thoughts are rendered while Hugo is in the British internment camp, where days seem endless. This is an aspect which he relates to the Nazi extermination camps, as he uses the German expression "Nacht und Nebel. Night and Fog" to describe the pointlessness of life in the Indian camps. This particular phrase was used by Hitler to condemn Nazism's opponents without a court order; in fact, these words were responsible for many deaths during his regime. The fact that Hugo parallels the feeling of endless repetition he experienced while being imprisoned with one of the Nazi formulas for carrying out mass killings works to frame both the British internment camps and those created by the Nazi regime within that cyclical view of history from which the subject cannot escape, cannot return. Another relevant instance of this is observed when Partition forces Hugo to realise that: "*Here the world forced its way in without being asked: a hundred radios invaded it, either with the mournful songs so beloved of the Bengalis, full of regret, sorrow and sighs, or the rapid gunfire of news bulletins that marked the hours of the day and night*" (175; my emphasis). Once more, the first sentence in the previous quotation aligns the novel with Hegel's determinism. Indeed, Anita Desai explained that she wanted to depict this view of history in her novel: "history as a juggernaut [...], something that once it's set into motion can't be stopped and crushes everything in its way" (quoted in Fielding 2000, 14). As has been observed, history has completely crushed Baumgartner's life.

All these aspects reach their maximum expression with the ending of the novel, the part that has received most critical attention. Hugo accepts the young German tourist despised by his fellow Indian into his house, but the German kills Hugo and steals his

⁵ These "sights" refer to the scarce vestiges of life that can still be appreciated inside the camps. Baumgartner spends a lot of time observing the behaviour of the insects around him as a way of killing time in this tedious setting, which leads him to reflect on the futility of human life.

adored silver trophies,⁶ escaping without being caught by the police. Thus, repetition has its most obvious manifestation here: the Jewish character is killed by the German in order to steal his silver trophies, years after his parents' deaths in Germany. In spite of the belatedness, a seemingly predetermined destiny catches up with him.

The two possible interpretations of this ending make the complexity of Desai's novel evident. On the one hand, if we link the theories about Jewishness exposed in the first section with this conclusion, we could argue that German-Jewish destiny as depicted in the book echoes the fatalistic view of history according to which the Jews cannot escape their fatal destiny. If read only in this light, the final message of the novel could be quite negative as it would turn the main character into a redemptory figure whose death validates the suffering experienced during his life. In this recreation of a story related to the Holocaust, Desai's work would reinforce negative connotations of Jewishness by portraying Hugo as a scapegoat figure who, in Todorov's terms, deprived of his freedom to choose his destiny, is deprived of his humanity altogether (1997, 61). Yet, on the other hand, I would argue that the fact that Desai deploys the process of Otherness both in the West and the East, together with the multidirectional model of memory and history previously identified, means the Jew is turned into a universal symbol of the impossibility of escaping the workings of history. Thus, the Holocaust acts here as a metaphor for the general condition of humanity and Hugo's destiny contributes towards this casting of light on the human condition. This is an aspect which becomes more apparent when Baumgartner's death is depicted as part of a theatrical scene—"the audience shivered with delight" (228).⁷ A theatricality that illustrates that human beings are the audience of history and that history will go on and on, as it appears to do after Hugo's tragic death: "Other things to do, after all. Have to get on, with living" (229). This effect has been enhanced by the circularity of the novel as well as the multidirectional connections established at the formal, symbolical and ideological levels, launching a reflection on the meaninglessness of human life, and turning Hugo's failed quest for identity into a metaphor for humankind.

Following this interpretation, readers are left with a pessimistic view of the destructiveness of human beings, and might have to come to terms with the same feelings experienced by Hugo, namely that such destructiveness does not make any sense but cannot be avoided: "Germany there, India here—India there, Germany here. Impossible to capture, to hold, to read them, make sense of them" (216). Even though

⁶ These trophies are of special importance for Baumgartner because he obtained them when gambling in the horse races during the first period of his life in Bombay. As soon as he arrived in the city, Chimanlal became his first employer; he was a business man that was very nice to him and gave him the prizes they won in the races in order for him to remember these lucky times. Baumgartner never sold the trophies and kept them since that time as they symbolised that moment of his life when he thought his luck could change and a new beginning could take place in the city of Bombay (194).

⁷ This "audience" meaning Baumgartner's neighbours together with the police officers that appear to contemplate the crime scene.

it partly reinforces the view of the Jew as the eternal Other, the fact that this Jew is the Other in the West *and* in the East demonstrates that Desai has employed this stereotype in order to point out its universality. By depriving the Other of its particularity, she makes it applicable to a more general post-Holocaust and postcolonial human condition. Baumgartner's story acquires a universal meaning that has been defended by the writer when she argued that: "Hugo is not representative of the Jewish race to me but of the human race, of displaced and dispossessed people and tribes all over the world. [...] In India this happened to Muslims, in Pakistan to Hindus, it is still happening—people are being victimized because of their religion, or caste, because of war and history" (in Fielding 2000, 145). By making the main character die at the hands of one of those who would have killed him had he not escaped the Holocaust, the book reinforces the fatalistic Jewish view of history, that which dooms Jews to endlessly endure all kinds of miseries. Yet this is done to disclose the human disposition towards stereotyping practices and to unveil the historical determinism according to which in this novel, history is "a process of endless and meaningless re-enactment" (Newman 1990, 51).

6. NO ESCAPE FROM THE HOLOCAUST (METAPHOR)?

Reading this novel through the lens of Jewish and Holocaust Studies allows me, then, to conclude that the character of Baumgartner should not be dismissed as a stereotypical representation of the Wandering Jew. However, as Stähler argues, Desai's intention of "stressing the universal character of suffering of which the Holocaust [and the traditional Jewish stereotype] becomes a sign" contributes to reaffirming a common humanity (2010, 85), one that is condemned to repetitive cycles of destruction. *Baumgartner's Bombay* endorses the current tendency to see historical and collective traumatic episodes within a more interrelated global context. In reading the novel within the context of the multidirectional model of memory, I find that Desai's work successfully challenges the competitive models of memory that attempt to politicise the degrees of victimisation of different collectives and the notion that Jewish suffering is unique. Likewise, by turning the Holocaust into the constant haunting element of the narrative, the novel still supports the discourse which sees it as a *referent* of the traumatic nature of the twentieth century. As such, my study shows that novels like Desai's do not foster an *either/or* view on the relevance of the Holocaust in current processes of memory negotiation, but rather they reveal the miscellaneous shades of those hegemonic views on history and binary interpretations of the world which are still predominant in our world. Thus, *Baumgartner's Bombay* substantiates the argument that the Holocaust has become a cultural metaphor alluding to a broad range of recent conflicts. The characters of this novel cannot escape the Holocaust, neither as victims nor as perpetrators, and the fact that the Holocaust is linked to the traumatic collective history of Partition and India's postcolonial legacy can be read as a metaphor in itself. Not only is Baumgartner unable to escape his Holocaust as a Jew,

but modern societies cannot escape from it either as the metaphorical meanings of Otherness, alienation, war and evil associated with it haunt our collective memories.

Nevertheless, just as one of my main claims is that the multidirectional re-interpretations of history and memory that appear in Desai's work should be welcomed, I would also argue that the deterministic view of history cultivated by this novel has several limitations. The structure of the novel, the inalterable interconnection of fatal events and the representation of such a passive protagonist may generate feelings of impotence, thus launching a reflection on human powerlessness in the face of the socio-political forces that move history. Yet this also shows a crude reality: as individuals, we are manipulated by forces which are out of our control once history has been set in motion. These are the same forces that have led civilisations to perpetually rise and fall, to put it in Eliotean terms. But, if books like this point a finger at these forces, their disastrous consequences and the universality of the human suffering that they provoke, perhaps they should also be viewed as a first step towards escaping the Holocaust as a metaphor for the worst atrocities of which humanity is capable, and in striving for refreshed views on memory and history according to which human beings are much more interrelated and implicated in each other's fates.

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