Entangled Memories of the Holocaust and Partition in Anita Desai's *Baumgartner's Bombay*

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1 Introduction

The twentieth century has been given the unflattering title of “the Century of Genocide” (Levene 305). Indeed, “when one considers the twentieth century as a whole, one is struck by the pervasiveness of mass murder” (Stone, “Genocide” 49). While doing research for this master dissertation, I realised that genocide studies can make a person seriously question humanity, but I also became aware of the need to face these violent histories in order to prevent them from happening again.

My master dissertation has allowed me to combine my love for literature with an interest in history and especially praxeology. Anita Desai’s novel Baumgartner’s Bombay is based on the memories of the violent histories of the Holocaust and the Partition of India and Pakistan, and on the shattering effect that these events have on a victim’s life. I hope to show in this dissertation that, although the Holocaust and the Partition are very different, it is important to move away from the compartmentalization of these historic events towards a new approach: multidirectional memory, which is based on the interference and overlap between seemingly distinct collective memories (Rothberg, “The Work” 1234).

In Chapter 2, I will briefly touch upon the violent histories of the Holocaust and the Partition. I will particularly have a look at how these events where remembered, and especially the problems involving the remembrance of these events, like the need to declare the Holocaust unique, and the pertinacity to sweep the violent events of the Partition under the rug. Subsequently, I will touch upon some new approaches that have emerged, especially the theory of multidirectional memory developed by Michael Rothberg, and I will discuss the representation of these traumatic events in literature.
The third chapter deals with Desai’s book *Baumgartner’s Bombay*, and starts with a brief biography of Anita Desai. In section 3.2, I will discuss some disputable critiques of the novel, namely those criticisms of Patrick Colm Hogan and Tony Simoes da Silva. Patrick Colm Hogan, is of the opinion that, because Desai models some aspects of her novel on *Heart of Darkness*, she transforms “the general population of India, especially Hindu India, into the semihuman savages of Conrad’s Africa, in the most colonialist interpretation of that work” (36). This criticism seem to be an example of the tendency of a certain branch of postcolonial theory to refuse interaction between Jewish and post-colonial studies. To be able to refute this claim properly, a brief survey is included in section 3.3 with criticism on *Heart of Darkness*, which will especially focus on the most colonialist interpretation of the novella, but also provides some rebuttals of this claim. Tony Simoes da Silva is of the opinion that the Indian setting of *Baumgartner’s Bombay* is only secondary to the story. Both criticisms seem unable to discern the subterranean links between the Holocaust and the violence accompanying the Partition, and are examples of the ‘competitive memory’-model that believes that memories crowd each other out of the public sphere.

Section 3.4 deals with the actual analysis of *Baumgartner’s Bombay*. In this analysis, I will both counter some of the arguments of Hogan and da Silva, and establish my own reading of the novel, based on Rothberg’s theory of multidirectional memory. This will show that Desai has written a novel in which the memories of both the Holocaust and the Partition intertwine, without drowning each other out. In the conclusion, I will summarize the main arguments of my analysis of *Baumgartner’s Bombay* in support of my reading.
2 Traumatic Histories

In Baumgartner Bombay, the traumatic histories of the Holocaust and the Partition of India come together in the figure of Hugo Baumgartner. Baumgartner, a German Jew, has to flee pre-war Germany to India to escape the looming Nazi regime. He had spent his childhood living with his parents in the apartment above their prosperous furniture shop with “elegantly languorous chaises-longues in carved mahogany or consoles in blonde wood with gilded scrolls basked in the light from the floor-to-ceiling windows” (26) in the showroom. But during the anti-Semitic climate of the end of the 1930s, the policed raided their house and his father was taken to Dachau, and upon his release (“In that early year, it was still possible to leave Dachau” (43)) he committed suicide. His mother had to sell their furniture shop to their Aryan timber supplier, Herr Pfuehl, and Hugo and his mother moved to the small office downstairs. But times were getting dangerous for the Jews, and Herr Pfuehl wanted them out: “Yes, he wanted them out, he wanted to be rid of the past history of the firm and of the Baumgartner name – but is was not only that. . . . He was afraid of being accused of harbouring Jews when Hitler was trying to rid the sacred fatherland of them” (54). Baumgartner had to leave his mother, who was reluctant to part with the old ways, and headed to India for business. After a stop-over of a week in Venice, he arrives in Bombay only to be sent on to an associate in Calcutta, the Muslim Habibullah. When he arrives in Calcutta, “[t]he news that came from Europe became rapidly more alarming” and matters take a tragic turn when he is taken to an internment camp for being a German national and thus a “hostile alien” (106). When he is finally released, he is again confronted with war in Calcutta (162), but this time it is the violence that accompanies the partitioning of British India. He stays on for a little while, but when it gets too dangerous, he leaves Calcutta for
Bombay. In Bombay, Chimanlal, the Hindu associate of Habibullah, gives him work and takes him with him to his “sole vice” (192), the horse races. Baumgartner discovers that he has a gift for picking the winners and together with Chimanlal, he buys a horse that wins a couple of races. After a moderately successful career in timber and a forced retirement when Chimanlal’s son takes over his dead father’s business, Baumgartner spends his days tending to the maimed street cats who have now taken up residency in his apartment. It is on one of his trips to fetch scraps of food for his cats from the local cafés that he is introduced to Kurt, a young German wanderer. Baumgartner takes him in and gives him something to eat, but Kurt sets out in search for drugs. In the end, Kurt returns in the middle of the night and kills Baumgartner for some silver prizes from the horseraces.

In the first two sections of this chapter, I will examine how the traumatic histories of, respectively, the Holocaust and the Partition have been remembered, and especially the problems this has presented, for instance the claim that the Holocaust holds a unique place in history and the insistence on forgetting the violent events of the Partition. In section 2.3, I will have a more detailed overview of some new approaches, especially the theory of multidirectional memory developed by Michael Rothberg. I will elaborate on the advantages of using such alternative approaches. In section 2.4 I will discuss the representation of traumatic histories in literature, and especially the suitability of literature to the negotiation of multidirectional memory.

2.1 The Holocaust and Uniqueness Claims

The Holocaust is “the term used to describe the destruction of European Jewry by Nazi Germany between 1941 and 1945” (Levy, 88). This term was introduced after the Second
World War by historians as a counterpart for the Hebrew word “shoah”\(^1\) ("Holocaust," def. 2d) but “it has been foreshadowed by contemporary references to the Nazi atrocities as a ‘holocaust’” in the sense of “complete destruction, especially of a large number of persons; a great slaughter or massacre” (“Holocaust,” def. 2c).

David Moshman distinguishes between a narrow and a broader meaning of the Holocaust:

- **In the narrow sense**, the term refers to the Nazi Judeocide, the deliberate and systematic killing of five to six million Jews by Nazi Germany during the course of World War II. In the broader sense, the Holocaust encompasses Nazi efforts to eliminate Gypsies, Poles, homosexuals, the disabled, and others whose elimination served ideological goals distinct from the war effort. (433)

But even within the broader sense the Nazi Judeocide occupies a central position. And even in relation to the concept of genocide “the Holocaust is widely construed as the prototypical\(^2\) instance of genocide” (433).

Moshman also emphasizes that this does not mean that the Holocaust is seen as typical, because after the trial of Adolf Eichmann the Holocaust came to be regarded as unique. Elie Wiesel wrote:

> I always forbade myself to compare the Holocaust of European Judaism to events which are foreign to it. Auschwitz was something else. The Universe of concentration camps, . . . , lies outside, if not beyond, history. It’s vocabulary belongs to it alone.”

(qtd. in Moses: 12).

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\(^1\) Shoah means “catastrophe” and is often used in the same sense as “Holocaust”, but these terms are not synonymous. Some people are against the use of the term “Holocaust” to denote the Nazi genocide of the European Jews because of its original meaning of ritual sacrifice, which seems to attribute a divine quality to the event.

\(^2\) Moshman makes a distinction between formal and prototype-based concepts. Formal concepts are defined on the basis of a set of necessary and/or sufficient conditions. Prototype-based concepts, on the other hand, are defined on the basis of prototypical instances. (Moshman, 432)
Wiesel’s position is shared by many scholars, most of whom are Jewish. It is also the cultural mainstream within Jewish communities (Stone, “Historiography” 128).

Why are some scholars so eager to label the Holocaust “unique”, “uniquely unique” or “unprecedented”? We cannot overlook the fact that to members of the victim group the Holocaust was experienced as an insurmountable trauma. Both Dan Stone (“The Historiography” 129) and A. Dirk Moses think that many “Jews, especially the direct survivors, . . . treat this genocide as sacred, and it had become an important marker of collective Jewish identity” (Moses 11). To understand what is meant by “sacred” we need to take a closer look at Emile Durkheim’s theory of the distinction between the sacred and the profane:

Group identity . . . is constituted by a shared sense of the basic division of the world into two domains, the sacred and the profane. The former comprises objects and events that are loved, venerated or dreaded, and that are superior in dignity to the ordinary world of the profane. This division implies an obvious hierarchy: the sacred is special, and the profane is not. Without a shared sense of the sacred, group identity would dissolve. But preserving the sacred status of certain objects and events is not only a matter of communal survival; it is a response to suffering. (qtd. in Moses: 11)

The hierarchy of the sacred over the profane helps the survivor of trauma to cope with the traumatic events or even to conquer them. It is in a sense a comfort to them. The sacred aura of the group’s “totem”, which is its most holy thing or object, extends to both the sign or representation of the totem and the members of the clan who comprise the core of the community. So the victims acquire a sacred status, and they guard how the Holocaust gets depicted because they would not want it to be defiled. The Holocaust is seen as a negative
cult or a “piaculum,” as Durkheim puts it: “the commemoration of a calamity, that is, a trauma” (qtd. in Moses: 11)

It is important to them that the ‘uniqueness-status’ is preserved and that it is not just one of many mass killings that one can find flipping through the pages of history books. It is not only an important part of their Jewish identity, but to a lot of Jews the Holocaust and its memories are considered to be a prevention against the renascence of anti-Semitism (Stone “The Historiography” 129; Moses, 14). This unyielding hold on the uniqueness position by the defenders goes so far that every time it is challenged, the criteria are changed\(^3\) (Stone “The Historiography” 130).

Some critical historians working in the discipline of comparative genocide studies oppose the Holocaust’s uniqueness, e.g. Donald Bloxham, Mark Levene, Charles Maier, Dirk Moses, David Moshman, Dan Stone, and Scott Straus. They argue that it casts a shadow over so-called “lesser” or “incomplete” indigenous genocides, because they cannot measure up to it. They are considered marginal or even “primitive” (Moses 7). These claims only reinforce the Eurocentric position that seems to imply that our genocide here in Europe was more important than other, non-European genocides (Stone “The Historiography” 130). This position prevents a lot of researchers from looking beyond the differences between the genocides and noticing the similarities.

These accusations of Eurocentrism are in no way new. In 1950, Aimé Cesaire already condemned this position, saying that

what [the white man] cannot forgive Hitler for is not the crime in itself, the crime against man, it is not the humiliation of man as such, it is the crime against the white

\(^3\) The criteria can be the number of victims, the role of technology (e.g. the gaschambers), the role of the state, or the intention of the perpetrators. “All of these criteria can be and have been questioned by valid comparisons” (Stone, “The Historiography” 130).
man, the humiliation of the white man, and the fact that he applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the “coolies” of India, and the “niggers” of Africa. (Cesaire’s emphasis 36)

So, as Stone has discussed in “The Historiography of Genocide: Beyond ‘Uniqueness’ and Ethnic Competition”, this quotation about the West’s genocidal history should actually be a sign for the proponents to see that the main justification of their declaration of uniqueness for the Holocaust is that it happened “‘in the heart of civilized Europe’ rather than in the midst of (supposedly) primitive or barbaric societies” (133).

Hannah Arendt wrote The Origins of Totalitarianism one year later. In this book she links imperialism with the Holocaust by proposing what Richard King and Dan Stone call the “Boomerang Thesis” (2-9). Arendt pointed out that certain features of imperialism, like “[r]acist theories, non-democratic assumptions (rule by decree and enforcement by bureaucracy) and particular practices (forced population transfers, protogenocidal massacres and a profound heedlessness about human life)” (King and Stone 2-3) had a boomerang effect and ‘returned’ to the European political and intellectual cultures. First of all, this helped cause a strengthening of authoritarian modes of political rule, such as totalitarianism, in Europe. But at the same time, she emphasized that this boomerang effect was just one in a variety of forces and factors that led to these authoritarian regimes, and that this effect was not just apparent in Germany but in the whole of Europe. Secondly, Europe was permeated with racial thinking and an augmentation of racist ideologies. The European ideology of imperial grandeur and/or ‘mission to improve’ these ‘backward colonial areas’ actually helped to justify their domination of the areas they colonized (3).

Moses (19-28) elaborates on this link between colonialism and genocide, and makes a distinction between a liberal theory of genocide and post-liberal theories. For the liberal
theory of genocide, the intention of the perpetrators is most important. They must display
the premeditation to completely exterminate a group of people. Hence the cultural
destruction of the group’s identity without killing its members, is not considered genocide.
The first consequence of this insistence on the premeditation of the perpetrators to
exterminate a group of people is that the origin of the intention is situated within the
motives of the perpetrator, which in colonialism is not extermination of a group of people
but, according to Roger W. Smith, greed (qtd. in Moses: 20). Killing people is not the motive
of colonialists, it is merely a consequence of their greed. The second consequence of these
conditions to constitute a genocide, according to the liberal theory, is that liberals assign the
state the role of genocidal perpetrator, because only the state has the power to commit and
prevent genocide (21). But with ‘state’ they only mean the ideologies about it (like fascism)
rather than looking at it as a civil society, thus ignoring the augmentation of racist ideologies
that seem to justify the expulsion or extermination of natives. Another problem with the
liberal position is that the theorists who adhere to this position give the ‘great genocides’ of
the twentieth century a special status, because they were based on totalitarian ideologies.
Historians that regard the Holocaust as unique adhere to the liberal theory.

Many other scholars, among whom mostly victims of genocides that were assigned a
profane status in the light of the ‘singularity of the Holocaust’, have reacted by dethroning
the Holocaust and assigning this unique position to another genocide, e.g. the colonial
genocide against Native Americans. But this approach is equally objectionable, because
these scholars still draw a line between the genocide that they describe as unique and other
traumatic histories. As long as we regard any instance of genocide as unique and let one
genocide become the genocide that other genocides have to live up to (so the paradigmatic
or prototypical genocide), we are aiding a kind of “competition for ethnic suffering, [a]
search for the sacred event that marks out one community as more worthy of attention and respect than others.” (Stone 2004, 134)

According to Moses, the post-liberal theory, on the other hand, essentially equates genocide and colonialism, because according to the adherents of this theory the destruction of a people’s culture is just as genocidal as mass murder, given that destroying “the indigenous systems of meaning and ultimately the survivor’s will to live, [ultimately results] in widespread death.” (23) In the opinion of the post-liberal theorists, nation states preferred the liberal definition of genocide with the emphasis on intent because some tactics that these nation states used to rule colonial territories would, in the post-liberal definition, be seen as genocidal. Tony Barta acknowledges that indigenous deaths were more often the result of the unintended consequences of colonization, but he wonders if they can therefore be excused as accidental (qtd. in Moses: 25). To him it is exactly from the consequences that we have to deduce the real nature of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. The colonizer can live in objective ‘relations of genocide’ with the colonized (in his example the white Australians with the Aborigines). But the equation of cultural genocide with physical extermination fails to convince, because although everyone agrees that cultural genocide is terrible, most people would intuitively see physical extermination as worse.

Both the liberal and the post-liberal view rely on what they exclude, whether it is the fact that the Holocaust is comparable to other events or not. Rothberg refers to the work of Deborah Lipstadt, “who suggests links between those who relativize the Shoah through comparison and analogy and those who deny its existence” and she argues that both groups blur the “boundaries between fact and fiction and between persecuted and persecutor” (qtd. in Rothberg, “The Work”: 1233). It would be too simple to say that colonialism is non-
genocidal (as the liberal theory claims) or genocidal (as the post-liberal theory would have it). A new approach is emerging which will be discussed in 2.3, but first I will discuss the violent history of the Partition of India and Pakistan and the way this history is or is not remembered. The Partition is an example of a violent history that has received far less attention than the Holocaust. Some of the reasons for the insistence to erase this history will be discussed in section 2.2. It is precisely the violent history of the Partition of British India that is mobilized to challenge the supposed uniqueness of the Holocaust in Baumgartner’s Bombay.

2.2 The Partition of India and Pakistan and its Representation

In Baumgartner’s Bombay, Baumgartner faces another “war” (162) when he is finally released from the internment camp in India after the Second World War (in which he was detained for being a German national), and he does not understand what is going on. In the camp, the inmates had only listened to the overseas news and “he had not followed what was happening in the immediate environs” (162). In fact, Baumgartner is confronted with the violence that was characteristic for India in the period before, during and after Partition. But what is meant by the Partition of India and Pakistan, and how is it represented in the historiography and literature? In the following paragraphs, we will answer these two questions to establish a useful background for the reader.

On August 14, 1947 and August 15, 1947 the sovereign states of, respectively, Pakistan and India were established out of the former British colony. But what should have been a period of celebration was actually marked by extreme violence and despair. After the

4 The answer to the question ‘what is meant by the Partition of India and Pakistan?’ is based on chapter 7 “The 1940s: triumph and tragedy” of A Concise History of India (Metcalf 200-226) and Chapter 3 “The three partitions of 1947” of Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India (Pandey 21-43)
Second World War it was obvious how much the position of Britain in the world had changed and how urgent it was to address the matter of the transfer of power which the British had promised the Indians during the second World War in exchange for their support during the war. In the summer of 1942 the Congress party, the secularist party consisting predominantly of Hindus, which had became dominant in the anti-colonial struggle, had already launched the ‘Quit India’ movement because the British had not kept their promise of giving them more seats on the British viceroy’s executive council. In part because the Congress leaders were thrown in jail, the movement degenerated into uncoordinated violence, and the Congress leaders were kept in detention until the end of the war. When the Congress leadership was finally released after the war, they quickly started to mobilize the people, and the country was engulfed with large-scale urban demonstrations and rural uprisings. New elections were held and these reduced the political scene to two parties: the Congress and the Muslim League, which had become the sole representative of India’s Muslims.

The previous decades had mainly been about national liberation, but now the situation had become more complicated because the quest for self-government had been joined by the demand for Muslim self-government in a new country to be named Pakistan. This idea was fairly recent. It was only in March 1940 that the Muslim League had formally proposed to have separate states for the Muslim-majority regions in the north-west and the north-east of India; a plan which the media had dubbed the ‘Pakistan Resolution’. In the summer of 1946, the Congress and the Muslim League seemed to agree on the Cabinet Mission Plan which proposed an India consisting of three federating units – two being the Muslim-majority provinces in the north-west and north-east of India and the rest of India the third – but eventually it collapsed due to suspicions and reservations in both camps.
Especially the Congress preferred a completely independent India to a state weakened by the Muslim majority provinces, and the Congress leadership pressed the British to move quickly towards an Interim Government (controlled by representative Indians) thinking that the transfer of power was most important and that the people of India would sort out all the remaining issues themselves.

The Muslim League grew desperate, and to make sure that the Congress would not ignore their demands, they decided on ‘Direct Action’. On 16 August 1946, or ‘Direct Action Day,’ violence broke out between Hindus and Muslims in Calcutta. About 4,000 people from both sides were killed, and thousands were injured or homeless afterwards (Metcalf 213). The violence spread and took over many parts of northern India by March 1947, and it did not just affect the Hindus and Muslims, but also minority groups like the Sikhs, whose historic homeland was the greater Punjab region. This violence persuaded a growing number of Sikhs and Congress members that Partition was necessary. In that month, they voted for a partition of Punjab “into Muslim-majority and Hindu/Sikh-majority halves and asked that the same principle be applied to Bengal.” This bred bad blood amongst the League, and by the end of the month the League agitation had succeeded in bringing down the coalition ministry in Punjab “comprising Muslim, Sikh and Hindu ministers from the Unionist, Congress and Panthic parties” (Pandey 23). This was in many ways a turning point: the League was now determined to form the government in the Punjab, demands for Pakistan reached a climax degenerating into communal frenzy, and the Muslim League government became far more militant. In several divisions of the Punjab, Sikh and Hindu ‘minorities’ in the rural areas were attacked by mobs of Muslim peasants and their shops and houses were destroyed. “In some areas . . . savagery was carried to an extreme degree and men, women and children were hacked or beaten to death, if not burned in their houses” (24). Forcible
conversion of males and abduction of females\(^5\) were not uncommon, and many people committed suicide or killed their own family to save them from dishonour. In these months huge numbers of refugees, and refugee camps, were reported. The events in the Punjab outdid other violent events in India “in the all-round hatred that they generated and the polarisation that they produced in Punjab and beyond” (24). It was not just the Muslims who committed atrocities, because by now “Hindus and Sikhs in far-flung districts in the Punjab, and elsewhere, united in an intensified hatred of all Muslims . . . and began, in the words of a colonial official, actively ‘organising for strife’” (24).

The British were now eager to transfer power as quickly as possible to successor governments that might be able to restore order, and they appointed the young Lord Mountbatten as the last viceroy with instructions to transfer power by June 1948, a date which he soon moved up to August 1947. After the independence of Pakistan and India on 14 and 15 August, which effectively partitioned the country, the opinion that the “‘minority’ . . . did not belong in lands that had now been designated Muslim or non-Muslim” (32) spread quickly. This led to the eviction of almost all Hindus and Sikhs from West Punjab and other north-western parts of the former British India (approximately 5 million people) and the eviction of all Muslims from East Punjab (5.5 million people). Afterwards the Indian Punjab was 60 per cent Hindu and 35 per cent Sikh and the Pakistan Punjab became almost wholly Muslim, underscoring the fact that it was a real ‘ethnic cleansing’. “Overall, partition uprooted some 12.5 million of undivided India’s people.” (Metcalf 219) This is according to many historians the largest migration of its kind in world history. The Sikhs, were also furious

\(^5\) During the riots of the partition about 40 to 50,000 women were abducted by the attackers. Soon after order was restored, both countries started to locate the abducted women so that “they could be returned to the nation to which they ‘properly’ meant to belong.” (Metcalf 222) But some men did not want to take back their wife after they had been violated, some women were already settled in their new homes with children and did not want to be uprooted again, and others had lost all their relatives. To the Indian and Pakistani governments, however, none of this was important. The forcible repatriation was only abandoned as official policy in 1954.
about the partition of the Punjab which sliced their community with their lands and shrines in two (217). Because one third of the eligible men from the Sikh community had served in the British army, and these men now used and passed on their military experience to revenge the partition of the Punjab, they became a group to be feared. They formed gangs called jathas, which would carry out raids on Muslim-majority villages in the East Punjab.

Another striking image of the violent history of the Partition is the arrival of trains carrying refuges across the border. These trains often arrived at their destinations carrying hundreds of dead bodies, and this would in turn pour oil on the fire, and a counterstrike would follow (217). The link is quickly established with another violent history, namely the Holocaust and the trains that carried Jews to their deaths in Germany a few years before. It is clear that the Partition of India and Pakistan was far from a simple division of British India into India and Pakistan, but that it was an extremely violent history that has wrecked the lives of millions of people. And it is still not all roses there today, looking at headlines such as “Are India and Pakistan Heading For War?” (Qadri) which appeared in The Guardian on 6 January 2009. This article refers to the tense situation between India and Pakistan after the attacks on Mumbai from 26 November 2008 until 29 November. “[T]he assailants were believed to be from . . . the jihadi militant group created under the auspices of Pakistani military intelligence in the late 1980s to wage guerrilla war in Indian controlled Jammu and Kashmir.” Problems concerning Jammu and Kashmir date back to the Partition, when both countries claimed these areas as rightfully theirs.

Now that I have given a brief overview of what happened during Partition in India, we will have a look at how Partition is represented in both history books and literary works. The historiography of the Partition is very different from that of the Holocaust (Pandey 3). While the Holocaust researchers have dealt with the question of guilt, and memorials now seem
to pervade several countries, the historiography of the Partition is hindered by a so-called need to forget what happened during the Partition. Why is this?

First of all, the question of guilt is usually avoided because, in contrast to the Holocaust, all the parties involved in the Partition – British, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs – were responsible (Daiya 7). When it comes to the part that the British played in the Partition - not being able to transfer power peacefully, their complicity in inciting the ethnic politics and the uncontained ethnic violence while they were still in command – the history books are muted (9). Instead British accounts are pervaded by adjectives such as ‘bestial’ and ‘primitive’, to emphasize the lack of civilization of Indians, the cruelty and the irrationality of the Oriental and their essential ‘otherness’ (Daiya 9; Pandey 108), thus emphasizing that what happened was unavoidable.

Second, in India and Pakistan the representation of the Partition is closely tied to the image that the Indians and Pakistanis want to display of their new countries. The national history writing in India after the Partition has two characteristics which are very important to our case. The first is its ambivalent relationship with colonialism: it is connected to it, in the urge to write a ‘scientific’, ‘objective’ history, and at the same time adversarial, because this history “challenges a great deal of the fundamental propositions of colonialist historiography” (Pandey 48). The second characteristic is the urge of the historiography “to demonstrate the unity of India’s diverse peoples and traditions” (48), because India, with its national slogan ‘unity in diversity,’ wants to underline that it is a secular, democratic state in which there is a place for people of all faiths (142). It is in the interest of this unity that Indians are asked to forget what happened during the Partition. To recover memories and write histories of the Partition would actually endanger the inter-community relations and

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6 I will mainly focus on how the Partition was remembered in India and not Pakistan because Desai is an Indian author who is mainly concerned with Partition as it was experienced in India.
the greatness of their India (61). The violence that occurred was, according to most Indians, unfortunate but unavoidable, and it is part of the past. Now the Indians want to focus on their future and the ‘progress’ of the country.

Naturally Indian historians, with their insistence on a scientific and objective history, cannot just leave blank pages when it comes to this period of their history. But we can discern several techniques that allow the historians to tell the ‘truth’ of the traumatic history of the Partition and to elide it at the same time. One is to say that such violence can never be represented through narration. Let us just consider the remarks of Theodor Adorno, who famously said that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (280). This declaration will be further discussed in section 2.4. Another disciplinary device is to transform and in fact reduce the history of a traumatic event into a history of its causes or origins – which, thus, themselves become the event. By using this device the writer can again distance him- or herself from the violent events and can even render the history meaningless “by representing the violence as a part not of this, but of some other history: an alien people or nation’s doing” (Pandey 46). Another disciplinary device is to localize the violence, so it becomes irrelevant or less relevant to history. The violence can be localized in time, because historians label it an aberration or as Javeed Alam labels it, “a moment of a loss of sanity [when people] start killing each other” (qtd. in Pandey: 59). According to this explanation these things just happen, and these instances of violence require no historical explanation. Violence can also be localized in space, “as a characteristic happening in some unassimilated part of the society or the world” (46), and it is not seen as a part of the national history, because it is just a detail: “These things happen there” (emphasis added, 46). These techniques were used until fairly recently to elide and explain away the genocidal dimension of the Partition.
This urge to elide the Partition’s ethnic violence has been replaced in recent revisionist works by a focus on the Partition. According to Kavita Daiya, these revisionist works place the focus on the Partition in two ways. First of all, these works now translate Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, and Bengali literature about the Partition into English. This has resulted in a range of new novels and edited collections of short stories and poetry. Second, oral testimonies of Partition survivors and witnesses come to hold the spotlight, especially in feminist and subaltern studies. These testimonies have become an important addition to the history, which now make “audible the silences in the histories and memories of Partition” (10).

It is also interesting, if we keep in mind the Indian nationality of Anita Desai, to have a look at how literature in India dealt with the Partition and in what literary climate she wrote *Baumgartner’s Bombay*. Literature seems to have followed the same track from silence about Partition to authors putting the focus on Partition. In the immediate aftermath, a lot of literary works did not mention Partition. Even writers who had witnessed the violence chose not to talk about it (Zaman 13). The Indo-English writers, who had emerged during the twenties and thirties, fell silent in the years after Partition or chose to simply ignore those years and kept on writing about the years before Partition (19). To see the impact on literature immediately after Partition one needed to turn to Urdu, Hindi and Punjabi literature. The novels of north India mainly dealt with the violence accompanying Partition, so train massacres, murders, abductions and rapes were recurrent motifs (21). Bengali writing, on the other hand, did not put the emphasis on the violence but more on the feeling of displacement in West Bengal and on the formation of a new identity and hope for a new dawn in East Bengal (15, 16, 21). Bengali writers ignored the riots mainly to describe the attempt at building a new homeland or on finding a new home, which is quite similar to the
historical plea discussed earlier to forget what happened during Partition for the sake of the unity of the new country. Some writers, who had not encouraged Partition, also expressed a deep nostalgia for a time before Partition when Hindus and Muslims lived peacefully together as neighbours (59). From the sixties onwards a lot of stories of the Partition contained a love story which cut across communal lines: “Generally Muslim authors tend[ed] to have a Muslim boy [fall] in love with a Hindu girl, and a Hindu writer a Hindu boy [romance] a Muslim girl” (102). This romance is then nipped in the bud by the communal tensions of the Partition or because the lovers are separated (136). So in the aftermath of the Partition, even in literature it was not simple to represent this traumatic history. From the 1980s onwards the Partition has again become an important subject: “[a]lmost all the writers writing at that time [wrote] at least one book – often their major work – about the Partition” (214). Zaman discerns three differences between novels of the eighties, among which we can count Baumgartner’s Bombay (written in 1988), and earlier fiction:

The writer is no longer self-conscious about using English – and can even be playful about the idiosyncrasies of the English language; (2) accepts the hybrid or polyglot nature of his/her experience; (3) is no longer bothered by questions of why Partition happened or by a nostalgia for the past. The writers of the eighties, most of them born after the tumultuous events of the 40’s or too small to remember them, are unmarked by the passions of the period and can use the Partition as a myth . . . . They can therefore look objectively at Partition, can examine its impact on the present and, above all, exploit the opportunities given by the event. (214-15)

This section clearly shows how the representation of the traumatic events of the Partition of India and Pakistan has been a knotty problem in both history-writing and literature. It is not until recently that it has become possible to confront this traumatic history directly.
2.3 A New Approach

The remembrance and representation of a traumatic history, in its immediate aftermath is always very difficult. As we have seen in section 2.1 a lot of the victims of the Holocaust use the ‘consoling’ strategy of assigning their genocide a unique or sacred position. The drawbacks of both the liberal theory, which claims that colonialism is non-genocidal, and the post-liberal theory, which claims that colonialism is genocidal, have also been discussed in section 2.1, and it becomes evident that a move towards a new approach to deal with violent histories is necessary. A lot of victims of Partition use another strategy to deal with their traumatic history. They feel more comfortable erasing the traumatic events from their memory to be able to build up a new life in a new country. Or as Partition survivors sometimes say: “What is the point of telling today’s children about these things? All that has nothing to do with their lives and problems” (Pandey, 16). Both the Holocaust and Partition were traumatic histories, but even Steven T. Katz\(^7\), stressing the fact that to the generation that had survived the Holocaust it was impossible to account for such a trauma, mentioned the possibility that subsequent generations might find a way of dealing with the Holocaust. (Stone, “The Historiography” 138). And when it comes to the history of Partition, Zaman has pointed out that writers of the eighties novels, who did not experience the traumatizing events themselves (or at least not consciously) were no longer marked by the passions of the period and that they could look objectively at Partition, without feeling the urge to elide it. Some scholars have now proposed new methods to approach traumatic histories.

Dan Stone distinguishes between three different – but overlapping – approaches that try to avoid the opposing views of relativizing or universalizing colonial genocide: ‘nation-

\(^7\) Steven Katz and Yehuda Bauer are the two most prominent defenders of the uniqueness of the Holocaust. (Stone 2004, “Genocide”, 59)
building’, ‘world-historical’, and ‘anthropological’. Both the ‘nation-building’ and the ‘world historical’ approach consider genocide a fundamental characteristic of world history (Stone, “Historiography” 135). “They attempt to provide both a sociological typology of genocide and to provide a broad historical framework for this typology, making of it more than just an ideal type” (135). Research using the first approach – nation-building – shows that the framework of the traditional nation-state is insufficient for understanding the evolution of genocide. This approach tries to do away with the ‘sacred’ and seeks “to explain how states arrive at genocide as a viable option” (136). Dirk Moses, whom we can classify as adhering to the nation-building approach, sees genocide as the outcome of what he calls the racial century, a period stretching from 1850 until 1950. This century was characterized by a competition between nation-building and ‘people making’, namely “the fashioning of ethnically homogeneous populations domestically, that culminated in the Holocaust of European Jewry and other racial minorities in the 1940’s” (33-34).

The ‘world historical’ approach mainly differs from the first approach in that it puts more stress on structural or global economic factors. One scholar who supports this approach is Mark Levene, who sees genocide as “an outcome of the drive for nation-building in the context of the globalized market” (136). And it is this drive that contributes to the perpetuation of genocide today. European history has to be seen as a dynamic process. Both Levene and Moses share the view that “the Holocaust needs to be studied in the context of racism, nationalism, colonialism and imperialism if genocide is to be a meaningful tool of historical understanding” (Stone, “The Historiography”, 137). The ‘anthropological’ approach adds a human dimension to the first two approaches and tries to find sociological explanations for the perpetuation of mass violence, “negotiating between ‘human nature’ and ‘social structure’” (137).
Michael Rothberg has also thought about a new approach, which he calls multidirectional memory and which is closely linked to the shared view of Moses and Levene that the Holocaust needs to be studied in the context of racism, nationalism, colonialism and imperialism. Rothberg (2001) got the idea from having a look at an essay by Du Bois, “The Negro and The Warsaw Ghetto”. This essay is about Du Bois’s third visit to Warsaw, where he finds the Jewish Ghetto completely destroyed and realizes that this destruction “could only result from a racist vision of absolute segregation different from, but related to, that which lies behind the racist violence . . . with which he is already amply familiar in the United States” (179) but then against the African Americans. Du Bois’s approach, avoiding both absolute discontinuity and complete continuity between the black and Jewish histories, gave Rothberg the idea that a modified notion of what Du Bois calls ‘double consciousness’ may bring about a novel way of dealing with for instance Holocaust studies. Double consciousness, according to Du Bois, means that minorities are both “gifted with second-sight” by virtue of their inside/outside position vis-à-vis dominant culture and are plagued with a lack of “true self-consciousness” because they are “always looking at [their selves] through the eyes of others. (qtd. in Rothberg, “W.E.B. Du Bois”: 184)

It was exactly this combination of estrangement and insight that inspired Rothberg to develop his theory of multidirectional memory, which wants to move the Holocaust studies beyond the realist/antirealist deadlock (“W.E.B.” 171). Anti-realist discourse is, according to Rothberg, discourse “that draws an infrangible line between the Holocaust and all other events” (170) and realist discourse “insists on erasing all lines of discontinuity between the genocide and other histories” (171).
By introducing his concept of the multidirectionality of memory, Rothberg distances himself from those scholars who believe in the zero-sum logic of competitive histories. This means that he does not agree with the assumption that different “memories crowd each other out of the public sphere” (“Between” 161) but he actually believes that it is precisely in “this interplay between different pasts and a heterogeneous present” (162) that memories emerge. Rothberg defines multidirectional memory as follows: “[It] is based on the dynamic interference and overlap between seemingly distinct collective memories in memory and discourse among the Holocaust and other histories during the age of decolonization” (“The Work” 1234; “Between” 162). According to him, this multidirectionality of memory defines first of all the post-war era but also the workings of memory more generally. Rothberg focuses especially on how different histories of violence, including the violence of decolonization, entangle when put side by side. He demonstrated how multidirectional memory works by examining for instance the French-Algerian war and the cases of torture, censorship and resistance that emerge out of the testimonies. In the post-war era links are quickly established in the minds of people between what happened during e.g. the French-Algerian war and other traumatic histories like the Holocaust. When a survivor of the Holocaust hears about instances of torture used in the French-Algerian war, he or she will recall the torture that he or she has experienced during the Holocaust (or testimonies of family members), no matter how much these violent histories may differ from each other. Or in our case, if we read about women who are abducted during the Partition, and get the names of their rapist cut into their arms and breasts, or the dates of the rapes tattooed on them (Pandey 73), we will probably establish the parallel with the Jews being reduced to the number tattooed on their arm in concentration camps. Rothberg also emphasizes that the separation of these traumatic histories, by for instance assigning one historical event a
unique status, is not only morally suspect but it actually misses “the productive dynamic that occurs in the acts of juxtaposition, comparison, and analogy” (Rothberg, “The Work” 1244).

The multidirectionality of memory can be an efficient truth cure by documenting the truths of different violent histories and the crimes of state, and it is exactly memory, truth, and testimony that are central to postwar political movements and processes of decolonization (“Between” 163). This truth cure can also function as a ‘counter-memory’, a term coined by the French historian Michel Foucault which means: “a memory that disrupts the narrative of enlightened progress that official European culture tried to tell about its history” (qtd. in Murfin 242). Multidirectional memory is then ideal to be used in literature in that it produces “truth through the crafting of testimony” (Rothberg, “Between” 166) and thus establishing what Michael Warner calls a counterpublic testimony. According to Warner, “A public is the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse. . . .it “exists only by virtue of address” and the “degree of attention, however notional,” “granted by a text’s addressees” (qtd. in Rothberg, “Between”: 172). A public can become a counterpublic when “[i]t sets itself against the dominant by producing and circulating a stigmatized identity through forms that challenge the supposed neutrality and transparency of the general public,” and by recognizing that the very space of circulation mentioned in the definition of the public, “with its rules and conventions, can itself be a tool of exclusion and domination” (179). This counterpublic testimony exposes the multidirectional memories of violent histories and shows that these memories are already present in the minds of people but also that they are subject to ongoing forgetting. The use of the multidirectionality of memory transforms the meaning of being a survivor of a traumatic history as well as an engaged citizen in the present.
2.4 Traumatic Histories in Literature

Writing literature about a traumatic event like the Holocaust or the Partition of India and Pakistan has proven to be a much debated subject. One of the most frequently quoted statements on this subject is “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (280) by Theodor Adorno, from his essay “Cultural Criticism and Society” published in the early 1950s. Adorno feared that through aesthetic principles or stylization the Holocaust would be transfigured and stripped of some of its horror, and he denounced the aesthetic pleasure tied up with the artistic representation of the Holocaust. In “Meditations on Metaphysics” he moderated his statement and acknowledged that “[p]erennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream” (283) because silence about these terrible events, is not the answer: “In silence we simply use the state of objective truth to rationalize our subjective incapacity, once more degrading truth into a lie” (286). In his essay “Commitment” he refers to the role of literature to represent suffering:

I have no wish to soften the saying that to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric . . . But Enzenberger’s retort also remains true, that literature must resist this verdict . . . It is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it. (312)

Cathy Caruth has shown that the pathology of trauma consists “solely in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it” (Caruth’s emphasis, Trauma 4). Precisely because trauma is not assimilated by consciousness or not fully experienced, the traumatic event returns to haunt the survivor later on. Caruth has pointed out that trauma requires integration, both for the sake of testimony and for the sake
of cure, to reach the stage of working-through the trauma\textsuperscript{8}. But this is not a simple matter because the transformation of the trauma into a narrative memory “that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one’s own, and others’, knowledge of the past, may lose both the precision and the force that characterizes traumatic recall”, because “beyond the loss of precision there is another, more profound, disappearance: the loss, precisely, of the event’s essential incomprehensibility, the force of its affront to understanding” (Trauma 153-54). These quotes demonstrate that conventional narratives\textsuperscript{9} will not do justice to the unique specificity of a traumatic history. But “the impossibility of a comprehensible story does not necessarily mean the denial of a transmissible truth.” “An event that defies all representation will best be represented by a failure of representation. What is called for is the disruption of conventional modes of representation – which can be found in literature” (Craps, Introduction). In her reflection on the matter, Cathy Caruth agrees that the best way to represent traumatic experience is when it is told in “a language that is always somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding” (Unclaimed Experience 5). As Bennet relates, “artists and theorists need to resist the tendency to assume knowledge of, and identify with, a trauma that can be understood only in its own terms.” (14)

It is also easier to represent the multidirectionality of (traumatic) memory through literature than through historiography or sociological works, because literary techniques like a metaphor, which is representing one thing in terms of another, are ideal to “open up an alternative history . . . which challenges the compartmentalization of metropolitan history,

\textsuperscript{8} In Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma, Dominick LaCapra talks about three different ways of dealing with trauma (48). These three manners are deduced from the therapeutic goal “to further the movement from denial and ‘acting-out’ to ‘working-through’”. But LaCapra also states that working-through is always an incomplete process and that there is always a danger of relapsing into denial.

\textsuperscript{9} Stef Craps defines this as stories which aspire to closure; which promise a movement away from the past and towards coherence, towards a future that is not implicated in the events of the past. (Introduction)
colonial history and the history of European genocide” (Silverman 417). This ‘alternative history’ is the one we have discussed in section 2.3, which goes beyond relativizing or universalizing and actually seeks overlaps (418). Desai can for instance talk about the agony that Baumgartner feels when he hears no news from his mother, who he had left behind in Nazi Germany:

What could this continuing silence from his mother mean? Had she been swept up into the horrors of which the others in the barracks whispered and muttered in the dark? The terrible thoughts flooded in, an invading army that his closed eyes would not keep out, could not stop; they advanced like a nightmare to the inevitable.

(Baumgartner’s Bombay 118)

Further along in the book, Baumgartner goes to check if his Muslim business associate, Habibullah, is safe after he has witnessed the murder of one of his neighbours, and Baumgartner finds Habibullah’s office “empty, ransacked” (179). Baumgartner wonders “if Habibullah had fled to safety in East Bengal and not left it too late,” (180) but again Baumgartner will never know what exactly happened to his associate, as no news comes to let Baumgartner know if Habibullah is safe. The Holocaust and Partition are here both instances of violent histories that take away a person from Baumgartner’s life and that keep Baumgartner dangling as to what has exactly happened them. Silverman is right in stating that “[m]emory employed in this way may be capable of providing a ‘truer’ history than linear, narrative history” (428).
3 Anita Desai’s *Baumgartner’s Bombay*

### 3.1 A Brief Biography of Anita Desai

Anita Desai was born on June 24, 1937 as a daughter of an Indian father, D.N. Mazumdar, and a German mother, Toni Nime, in Mussoorie, a hill station near Delhi. (“Anita Desai”)

Growing up she spoke German at home, Hindi with her friends and neighbours, and English in the mission school she attended nearby. Because she had learned to read and write in English, this became her literary language (Julik). During her childhood she was surrounded by Western literature and music (Ostberg), she began writing at a very early age, and she finished her first story at the age of nine (“Anita Desai”). It is no surprise that she went on to receive a BA in English Literature from the University of Delhi when she became 21 (Julik).

One year later she married Ashrin Desai, and shortly afterwards she found a British publicist – because Indian publishers at that time paid no attention to local, contemporary writers – and she started publishing her work (Jai Singh). Her view of India, influenced by her family situation, has always been a special one. She once said herself: “I see India through my mother’s eyes, as an outsider, but my feelings for India are my father’s, of someone born here” (Griffiths, qtd. in Ostberg). So Desai is indeed gifted with the double consciousness, which we have already mentioned when we were discussing the article about W.E.B. Du Bois by Rothberg, “to view Indian history through European eyes and European history through Indian eyes” (Cheyette 68).

Anita Desai’s literary works are not widely read in India, mainly because she has a much less conservative writing style than typical Indian literature (Julik). Her work is mainly read in Indian universities and by a more Western readership. Her knack for using detailed
and graphic descriptions has, on the one hand, led to comparison with the modernist sensibilities of T.S. Eliot, William Faulkner, and Virginia Woolf (Prono), and, on the other hand, to accusations of being static (Jai Singh).

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 relationships and contrasts, the crumbling of traditions, and anti-Semitism (Prono).

3.2  Baumgartner’s Bombay and Some Debatable Criticisms

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
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...
‘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.

To prove the history of the individual Jew as an accomplice to colonialism, Cheyette gives the example of Benjamin Disraeli, who was born a Jew and promoted “English Jingoism along with the Victorian cult of Empire”. Disraeli argued that “[i]mperialism enacted the superiority of Judeo-Christian values throughout the world” (55). In spite of the collaboration of many individual Jews with the colonial apparatus, the Jewish people were still regarded as racial others and suspected during times of crises. Cheyette argues that, taking this into account, “the whitening of European Jewry needs to be understood historically as a failed quest for invisibility and not merely naturalised as the signifier of Jewish empowerment” (56). But the post-colonial response that resists the inclusion of Jewish history into the field of Western colonization, as an answer to these ‘complicit’ individual Jews, thus dismissing Jews merely as European subjects, is not very different from the colonial writing which “found it impossible to unproblematically subsume ‘the Jew’ as a facile aspect of a dominant imperial discourse” (56). The post-colonial attitude only reinforces Disraeli’s claim that Judeo-Christianity was transcending and Cheyette is of the opinion that “[b]y dismissing Jews merely as European subjects, it is as if the current privileged position of post-Holocaust, post-Zionist Western Jewry can be read back in time and space” (56).

The second form that Cheyette discusses in his article, is the more general history of Zionism, and the consequent victimisation of Palestinians since the turn of the century,
which does indicate “the historic collusion of a large number of European Jews with colonial discourse and practices which continues to this day” (56). Said, who – according to Cheyette – holds an “understandable anti-Zionist dimension”, makes a bifurcation of the ‘Jew of pre-Nazi Europe’: “one Semite went the way of Orientalism, the other, the Arab, was forced to go the way of the Oriental” (qtd. in Cheyette: 56). Cheyette points out that is wrong to make these kinds of distinctions, in name of Israeli nationalism, and that Jewish suffering “needs to be engaged with outside of a national narrative” (57). He considers it important to look at e.g. the work of Ella Shohat who challenges the orientalist distinction of East versus West or Arab versus Jew, by examining “a range of diverse histories, communities and identities [in] the Middle East which fall outside of these crude binarisms” (57) and placing these non-national histories against the “professionalised stud of compartmentalised historical periods and geographical regions” (qtd. in Cheyette: 57). In conclusion we can say that in his article, Cheyette clarifies why some post-colonial theorists feel so reluctant to consider Jews as victims of the colonizing West, but at the same time he shows that these reasons are also flawed arguments, and that many Jews have also suffered immensely because of Western imperialistic beliefs.

The scatching critical assessment of Baumgartner’s Bombay by Patrick Colm Hogan in the first chapter of his Empire and Poetic Voice is a good example of this tendency to refuse interaction between Jewish and post-colonial studies and to resort to a kind of competitive memory model, which we have proven inadequate in section 2.3. In this chapter he discusses the “Ideological Ambiguities of ‘Writing Back’”. Writing Back is “the process by which an author from a dominated group takes up and revises one of [the] canonical works”, “written by members of dominant groups, set out to portray the lives, feelings, and society of ‘subalterns’” (33). Hogan believes that Baumgartner’s Bombay engages in writing back by
revising *Heart of Darkness*, but, in his opinion, Anita Desai makes herself complicit with a colonial ideology. Because she models some aspects of her novel on *Heart of Darkness*, Hogan believes that:

> Desai ends up linking Indian culture and Indian people with mad violence, historyless primitivism, gross animality, and even imputing to Hinduism the celebration of cannibalistic rites. In short, Desai has, I believe, in effect transformed the general population of India, especially Hindu India, into the semihuman savages of Conrad’s Africa, in the most colonialist interpretation of that work. (36)

Tony Simoes da Silva is another critic of Baumgartner’s Bombay who does not seem to be able to discern the links between the traumatic histories of the Holocaust and the Partition as evoked in the novel. To him “Bombay and India are *simply* the setting of Baumgartner’s existential crisis” (da Silva’s influence) and he finds backing for his claim in a quote of Desai herself saying that her success in America was due to the fact that “the key to the work is a European key, a Western key. . . India is really superfluous as far as American readers are concerned” (da Silva’s influence, qtd. in da Silva). But it is important to realise that this is a ‘misappropriation’ of Desai’s quote by da Silva, simply to support his claim. It is not that Desai thinks that India is superfluous, but, as the quote actually proves, it is the opinion of some American readers. It is understandable that these readers, who are probably not familiar with the Partition, fail to pick up some of the important links between the violent histories of the Partition and the Holocaust. These readers actually misread the book because they do not have sufficient knowledge, or they read it in a very different way. But da Silva should know better than e.g. to talk about the Indian family living on the pavement in front of Hira Niwas, which is the apartment of Baumgartner in Bombay, in terms of “those people whose own “low self-esteem” has prevented them from working
hard enough towards a mythical notion of self-improvement and the financial rewards it entails”. This Hindu family living on the curb of Hira Niwas was in fact “a part of the migrant wave from the drought-stricken countryside, refugees from famine, or riots” (BB 7). Later on in Baumgartner’s Bombay, Hugo elaborates on the famine, by stating that although the English newspapers talk about “a cyclone that had wiped out a year’s crop of rice”, “crop failures”, and “shortage of grain” as an explanation for Viceroy Wavell’s decision to “cut the caloric ration of each man to 1200”, “he heard talk of food stocks having been transferred to the British army, of scorched earth tactics by the British army under Japanese threat, of wilful destruction of resources” (173). Desai uncovers the British tactic to sweep their complicity in the famine under the rug, and also offers a counter-memory to the reader. I think that any critic who has read this fragment would sit up, and not simply say that the living conditions of that Indian family, is caused by a mere problem of “low self-esteem”.

In my analysis of Baumgartner’s Bombay, I will go more deeply into the specific arguments of Hogan and da Silva, and I will counter these arguments and establish my own reading of Baumgartner’s Bombay while keeping in mind Rothberg’s theory of multidirectional memory. But first I will explain what Hogan means by “the most colonialist interpretation” of Heart of Darkness and look at some rebuttals of that interpretation, because insight in some of the arguments used in this discussion, will help us with the study of Baumgartner’s Bombay.

3.3 Heart of Darkness: Anti-imperialist and/or Racist?

Criticism on Heart of Darkness is abundant, to say the least, and on top of this the nature of the criticism on this book is very much like a web: in the middle of the web the book evokes multiple interpretations which can be seen as the threads, veering in their own direction
(e.g. a political interpretation, a psychoanalytic interpretation, etc.). However, a lot of the threads are also interconnected, because one interpretation elaborates on another or actually opposes the other and this ‘thread’ goes off in another direction. On the one hand, it is not easy to lift out one piece of the web to discuss a certain kind of criticism, in our case the criticism that scrutinized the anti-imperial or racist agenda of Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, and not have the feeling that you have done injustice to the beauty of its glistening whole, but on the other hand, it is no use getting entangled in it, when only one of the threads is relevant to our concerns.

At first, most reviewers saw Heart of Darkness as a critique of Belgian imperialism, although a minority did not agree and thought that the assumption that Conrad attacked colonization or even imperialism in his novella, would be carrying it too far (Goonetilleke 51). Some early critical responses to Heart of Darkness show that “Conrad’s opposition to imperialism was intrinsic to the novella and not something later imposed by postcolonial critics (51). Thomas Moser (1957) considers his view of the work as being critical of racist imperialism inseparable from the novel’s imagery, namely the fact that the usual pattern is reversed and that “darkness means truth, whiteness means falsehood” (qtd. in Murfin: 104).

Up until 1975, Heart of Darkness was regarded as the “classic anti-imperial text” (Goonetilleke 54).

However, in 1975, Chinua Achebe, a Nigerian author, famously criticized Heart of Darkness. He argued that Conrad uses Africa “as a foil to Europe, . . . in comparison with which Europe’s own state of spiritual grace will be manifest” (251). Africa is depicted as being “the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man’s vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality” (252). The river Thames, which has served Europe “for ages”, is described as the opposite of the Congo
river, and the description of the Intended versus the black woman has the same role. In this, according to Achebe, prejudiced account, the ‘savage’ woman functions as the counterpart for the refined, European woman. He already states his answer to the refutation that the attitude to the black people in *Heart of Darkness* is not Conrad’s but that of his fictional character Marlow by saying that the use of a narrator behind a narrator is only “to set up layers of insulation between himself and the moral universe of his history” (256). Achebe points out that Conrad has not taken the opportunity to hint at an alternative frame of reference that shows the reader how Conrad does not agree with his characters’ opinions and actions. When Marlow sympathizes with the dying blacks, Achebe says he does so merely out of an “English liberal position that required all Englishmen of decency to be deeply shocked by atrocities” (256), but the only question of relationship between the blacks and the white man is that the black lays a claim of distant kinship on the white man. This observation made Achebe come to the scorching conclusion that “Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist” (257) (in the first version he used the phrase “bloody racist”), and although he may now be “safely dead”, “his heart of darkness plagues us still” (259). Achebe went on to say that he does not think that a book that calls “the very humanity of black people . . . in question” and which is written by a man as “jaundiced” (259) as Conrad, should have a place in twentieth-century literature courses.

One year earlier, Bruce Johnson had voiced his disagreement with the notion that Conrad looked down on tribal life. The novella shows how the black man or native is “at one with nature and feels no sense of alienation” until this is brutally disrupted by the white man. Before the native did not “sense the need to create his own contingent values and sanctions and so [could] readily accept what presents itself as divine sanction” contrary to
the white men. It is this tendency of the natives “to create gods and to worship them” (qtd. in Goonetilleke: 55) that is abused by Kurtz.

Frances B. Sing was one of the first critics to respond to Achebe’s claims in “The Colonialistic Bias of Heart of Darkness”, an - according to Goonetilleke – “woolly” article (60). He is quite critical of Marlow when he says:

he may sympathize with the plight of blacks, he may be disgusted by the effects of economic colonialism, but because he has no desire to understand or appreciate people of any culture other than his own, he is not emancipated from the mentality of a colonizer. (Sing 272)

But Singh does not equate Marlow’s attitudes with Conrad’s and he defends Conrad by stating that he was “a man of his times, and as such, reflected the current anthropological position which held that primitive people were morally inferior to civilized ones.” (280)

Although Wilson Harris, a Guyanese writer, feels ‘sympathy’ for Achebe’s position, he does not agree with it. In his opinion, Heart of Darkness needs to be regarded as “a frontier novel,” by which he meant that “it stands upon a threshold of capacity to which Conrad pointed though he never attained that capacity himself.” (263) Goonetilleke elaborates on this statement saying that, according to him, Conrad pointed to and even anticipated post-colonialism but “that it is unfair to expect Conrad, in his time, to be fully post-colonial” (60). Cedric Watts does not agree with Achebe’s criticism either, and he even argues that “really Conrad and Achebe are on the same side” (204). Let us have a brief look at some of Watts’ rebuttals. He shows that in fact Conrad debunks the ‘comforting myths’ of which Achebe said he was a purveyor. He refers to “the myth of inevitable progress . . . ; the myth that white civilization is necessarily morally superior to ‘savagery’, the myth that imperialism is the altruistic matter of ‘weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways” (197) and
he shows that these myths are in fact mocked by the novella. Watts also refutes Achebe’s claim that “it is not part of Conrad’s purpose to confer language on the ‘rudimentary souls’ of Africa” by alluding to the passage where “[the black woman] talked like a fury to Kurtz for an hour” (200) and showing that although Conrad portrays the crew of the steamboat as cannibals, they ironically refrain from eating human flesh during the journey, and there are strong hints to suggest that Kurtz has participated in rites in which he eats meat. (201)

Achebe, however, responded quite vehemently to the claim that he was on the same side as Conrad by stating: “. . . I was not talking about sides. For me there is only one, human, side. Full stop!” (Achebe’s emphasis, qtd. in Goonetilleke: 61). C.P. Sarvan (and Mark Kinkead-Weeks for that matter) does not agree with Achebe when Achebe seems convinced that Marlow enjoys “Conrad’s complete confidence” (256). Sarvan maintains that “Marlow’s portrait is drawn with quiet irony and, at times, a mocking humor which denotes ‘distance’ between creator and character”. To him it was most important to keep in mind “the discrepancy between appearance and reality; between assumption and fact; between illusion and truth” (282), so the contrast between the native and the European, when we are confronted with the “merry dance of death and trade” (Conrad 29), is only an illusion rather than reality. Sarvan gives the intriguing example of how the “alleged primitiveness of the boilerman only serves to show the similarity between his appearance and the actions of the ‘civilized’” (Sarvan’s emphasis, 284).

Benita Parry, influenced by post-structuralism and deconstruction, came to the following conclusion: “to proffer an interpretation of Heart of Darkness as a militant denunciation and a reluctant affirmation of imperialist civilization, as a fiction that exposes and colludes in imperialism’s mystifications, is to recognize its immanent contradictions” (qtd. in Goonetilleke 62) which seems to be a more moderate position, but other excerpts
from her article, e.g. “the novella incorporates adumbrations of racist views”, shows that to a large extent Parry actually agrees with Achebe’s views. Achebe also seems to get new backing in the 1980s from critics who read *Heart of Darkness* from a feminist perspective, although they are at the same time critical of his contributions to the field of criticism. In their opinion, imperialism came to be considered as a “hyper-masculine construct” (Goonetilleke 63) that colonizes and pacifies not only the natives but also all women. Johanna M. Smith examined the construction of the minor female characters of the novella, namely the native laundress, the “silent” savage woman (who, as we have established before, does actually talk) and the Company women, who are allegedly silenced, and the two speaking European women: the Intended and Marlow’s aunt. These last two only speak words that show how they believe in the idea behind the work of the colonizers, but in a condescending manner it is revealed that this is mere womanly idealism, whereas the men know and the novella proves that “the Company was run for profit” (Conrad 27) thus making the women look like naive and feeble creatures that need to be protected from the truth. She contends that when Marlow depicts the savage woman as an embodiment of the African jungle, this serves “both masculinist and imperialist ends. It is an effort to defuse and control the power and sexuality both of the woman...and of that ‘fecund’ earth itself” (174). Bette London defends the view that gender and race are intertwining systems: Africa is seen as “the ‘dark continent’ of female sexuality,” “a sexuality and continent from which the novel’s European women are excluded” (Murfin 109). London evaluates the story as follows:

Dependent upon unexamined assumptions, themselves culturally suspect, the novel, in its representations of sex and gender, supports dubious cultural claims; it
participates in and promotes a racial as well as gender ideology that the narrative represents as transparent and ‘self-evident’. (qtd. in Murfin: 109)

Some critics represent a more intermediate position. Patrick Brantlinger contemplates in “Heart of Darkness: Ant-Imperialism, Racism, or Impressionism?” that it is unclear “to what extent Conrad’s critique can be generalized to imperialism beyond the Congo” (278). He believes that the reader can look at the novella in two ways: “Viewed one way, Conrad’s anti-imperialist story condemns the murderous racism of Kurtz’s imperative. Viewed another way, Conrad’s racist story voices that very imperative, and Conrad knows it.” (295) These contradictory positions are communicated by the use of ‘impressionism,’ a term used by Brantlinger to refer to the imagery and language of the novella (279), but the discussion about Conrad’s style would take us in a completely different direction. Interesting for our analysis of Baumgartner’s Bombay is Brantlinger’s remark that, if we take the biographical elements into account, the cannibalism is exaggerated in extent and nature, because normally cannibalism is used as a result of war, but Conrad depicts it as an everyday custom. This exaggeration is, according to him, standard in racist accounts of Africa.

In Culture and Imperialism, Edward Said provides us with a quite even-handed analysis. According to Said, Conrad is more self-conscious about imperialism because he was himself a Polish expatriate (25). He deems it possible to derive two possible views from Conrad’s narrative because of the form. The first one is the view that “there is no way out of the sovereign historical force of imperialism, and that it has the power of a system representing as well as speaking for everything within its dominion” (26). The second view is [indeed] “considerably less objectionable” (28). It shows that Conrad in a sense considered his work as being local, specific to a certain time and place. This means that:
Since Conrad dates imperialism, shows its contingency, records its illusions and tremendous violence and waste . . . he permits his later readers to imagine something other than an Africa carved up into dozens of European colonies, even if, for his own part, he had little notion of what that Africa might be. (Said’s emphasis, 28)

Another interesting analysis of Heart of Darkness, is the one by John W. Griffith who links the novella to anthropology in Joseph Conrad and the Anthropological Dilemma. In the nineteenth century, anthropology and ethnography put forward the dilemma of both wanting “to advance the European knowledge of and contact with other cultures” and at the same time “raising profound anxieties regarding the ability of one culture (particularly ‘civilized’ societies) to penetrate the thought of another society (‘the primitive’).” Conrad’s writing is strongly influenced “by the corresponding fear that such cross-cultural contact would prove dangerous to the members of each society”. When he describes Marlow wandering through the coastal port and seeing the decaying remnants of the imperial venture, he touches upon the decay and degeneration which at that time became almost synonymous with the imperial project because “[t]he Victorians feared the degeneracy which they perceived as one common element of imperialism” (30).

Both Hogan and da Silva (although the latter to a lesser extent) have linked Baumgartner’s Bombay and Heart of Darkness and claimed that Baumgartner’s Bombay participates in the colonalist rhetoric, which has also been attributed to Heart of Darkness. However, this brief survey of criticism on Heart of Darkness has shown that the colonial interpretation of Conrad’s novella is a contentious issue amongst scholars. In my analysis of Baumgartner’s Bombay I will show that, when it comes to Baumgartner’s Bombay, this colonial interpretation is incorrect.
3.4 A Study of Baumgartner’s Bombay

3.4.1 A Cyclic Structure

*Baumgartner’s Bombay* is composed out of the interweaving of two narratives. The first strand is recounted in the uneven chapters and it recounts the last day of Hugo Baumgartner’s life, from the morning when he sets out in search of food for his maimed cats to his brutal murder late at night and the discovery of his body by a crowd of onlookers. It has, as Mufti has also mentioned, the form of a modernist narrative whose chronology spans a single day (249). The second strand, which we can find in the even chapters, is the story of Hugo’s life. It depicts his life from the beginning of his life in a well-to-do Jewish family until the years of his final residence in Bombay, which is based on the classic Bildungsroman (Mufti 249). The novel starts with a flash forward of how Lotte, his best and even only friend and fellow German expatriate, arrives at her apartment after having fled the bloodstained murder scene in Baumgartner’s apartment, and it ends with the arrival of Lotte at the scene and her flight away from the horrible images. The last few lines describe how she is spreading out the postcards from Baumgartner’s mother that she has taken from his place “out of a desperate wish to keep something of Hugo for herself” (228). The letters were “stamped with the number: J 673/1” (229), and these numbers underscore the horrors of the Holocaust, because now the reader knows for certain that Baumgartner’s mother was taken to a concentration camp. Before we had only known that the letters had stopped after February 1941, that there was a stamped message on that that said “‘Answers on postcards only, in German’”, and that Baumgartner had wondered: “What officialdom had they passed through, giving them this chilling aspect?” (164)
The beginning and ending with the scenes with Lotte give the structure of the story the feel of it being a cycle and the phrase “In my beginning is my end” from the epigraph seems very appropriate. Baumgartner’s Bombay opens with the following epigraph from “East Coker” by T.S. Eliot: “In my beginning is my end. In succession / Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended, / Are removed, destroyed, restored . . .” This epigraph also evokes an endless cycle. This structure is in my opinion a way in which Desai wanted to depict “history as a juggernaut . . ., something that once it’s set into motion can’t be stopped and crushes everything in its way” (Desai, qtd. in Fielding 114). Anita Desai claims herself that she shies away from hinting at healing, stating that:

I’ve never really been able to impose that kind of conclusion on any of my books. I’m too pessimistic to do that for one thing. I can’t imagine the simple act of confession would bring about a total healing. . . . I don’t think I can bring myself to wrap up a book quite so neatly and tidily. Can there be such a healing? (Desai, qtd. in Fielding 160)

It is my opinion that the book can be seen as a warning. Yes, Baumgartner gets crushed by history, it even feels like the iron hand of destiny (Verma 167) because he escapes Germany only to be killed by a German drug tourist. But Desai also repeatedly shows how ignorant one community, e.g. the British, can be of the history of the other community, e.g. the German, and the different dividing lines within that other community, e.g. that there are German Jews and Nazi Germans. Throughout my analysis I will specify different instances of this ignorance and the consequences of this ignorance. Desai demonstrates that an ignorant attitude towards the histories of others causes severe problems. These instances will show that we need to move beyond the compartmentalization of different histories, and will
prove the importance of multidirectional memory to see the analogies and differences between different violent histories.

3.4.2 A Miscellany of Languages

Anita Desai’s desire to use one of the “locked-up” languages she had heard growing up (Fielding 115), namely German, has found a vent in the nursery rhymes and children’s songs which are included untranslated in the story of his childhood, the endearments in the letters Baumgartner’s mother has sent him from Germany, some German phrases in his conversations with Lotte, but also in the nationalistic and militaristic songs sung by the Nazi Germans in the British internment camp.

According to da Silva, Desai privileges some languages in the book. First of all, he thinks that German is represented as “a language of reason, a language of civilization” (da Silva’s emphasis). In his opinion, German is used to convey moments of extreme significance in the main character’s childhood, and is thus identified as a language capable of conveying the richness of the ‘human condition’ in all its nuances. Da Silva opposes this to the use of “Indian languages such as Bengali and Hindi,” which “are sprinkled much more sparingly throughout the work, rather like a spice too strong for the frail stomach of a Eurocentric readership”. English is, according to him, also privileged, because it is not just the medium through which Baumgartner’s story is told, but “[i]t is instead a language of ‘thick description,’ a language that portrays for a middle-class readership, essentially Eurocentric in its view of the world, the horror, the misery, the despair of real India” (da Silva’s emphasis).

Da Silva’s comment on Desai’s English as a use of thick description, reminds us of the discussion about the imagery and language of Heart of Darkness, and as we have seen is also a moot point between the critics of Desai’s work. Desai herself is aware that in her earlier
work, including Baumgartner’s Bombay, she used full and rich descriptions, and she explains that this is because she loves language and the use of language, but in her later work she has been more attentive to select adjectives “with the greatest possible care” (Jai Singh). English is simply her literary language, but she has not given it a privileged position. It is true that Desai uses English to depict misery and despair in India, but she does not present this misery and despair as inherent to India as a primitive culture. The despair and misery in India depicted in the book are caused by the Partition and find their equivalents in pictures of despair in Germany, as this dissertation will make clear. It is certainly true that Baumgartner does not favour English because when he arrived in India, he even had a hard time with his English: “his new language, dragging it off his tongue with a reluctance bordering on paralysis” (86).

When it comes to German, in my opinion, Baumgartner’s attitude towards his mother tongue is very conflicting. It actually reflect the difficult relationship with Germany, which is the country of his childhood memories, but also the country that has made him an exile by forcing him out, so a paradox “of self and belonging” (Mufti 255). We can already find traces of conflicting feelings in the nursery rhymes and children’s songs, which are song “with such ineffable sweetness” (BB 28), but at the same time he realised that “the sweetness always ended in a quaver” (29). Some of these songs even seem to have a prophetic dimension, e.g. when his mother sings the following songs:

Kommt ein Vogel geflogen,

Setzt sich nieder mein Fuss,

hat ein Brieflein im Schnabel,

von der Mutter ein Gruss.

Lieber Vogel, flieg weiter,
The lyrics of the song, about the separation of a mother and child and their correspondence via letters because they cannot be together, is a very suitable reference to the letters and postcards that Baumgartner receives from his mother. The feeling of the sweetness ending in a quaver, is also Lotte’s feeling about German when she is looking at the postcards: “Lotte pressed her fingers to her lips, to her eyes, to her ears, trying to prevent those words, that language, from entering her, invading her. Its sweetness, the assault of sweetness, cramming her mouth, her eyes, her ears, drowning her in its sugar” (BB 4).

Baumgartner’s struggle to construct a language for himself, is a reference to the problems Baumgartner has with constructing an identity for himself, and his move away from a German nationality, which I will explain in section 3.3.3. Baumgartner constructed a language for himself out of words “without knowing if [these words] were English or Hindi or Bengali”. This language was a “not Indian, but India’s, the India he was marking out for himself” (92). Desai’s sparing use of Hindu and Bengal words is not because she was worried about the “frail stomach of a Eurocentric readership” (da Silva), but because her main character, Baumgartner, had never really assimilated in any culture, and he knows German best because he has been brought up in German. When he first arrives in India, he still “enjoy[ed] the feel of German in his mouth, as familiar a taste as brown bread or beer” (96),

10 A bird comes a-flying
It settles on my foot
It has a piece of paper in its beak,
A greeting from my mother.
Dear bird, keep flying,
Bring a greeting, a kiss
For I cannot go with you,
Because I [have to] stay here. (Yannucci)
but after his experiences in the camp, with the Nazi Germans singing their nationalistic songs in German, he no longer had a need for the sound of his own language:

> it was years since he had ceased to crave the sound of his own language, the feel of it on his tongue. The language was slipping away from him, now almost as unfamiliar as the feel and taste of English words or the small vocabulary of bastardised Hindustani that he had picked up over the years. (150)

The only times that he still spoke German were with Lotte, but that was not why he wanted to see her. It was simply because “she belonged to the India of his own experience” (150). It was not that their experiences were completely the same, because they were not, but she also knew India from a position as a German exile.

### 3.4.3 Hugo Baumgartner, a German Jew

When a critic claims that a book endorses a colonial view of the natives depicted in it, one of the most important points of contention is of course whether or not the author agrees with this view, or if the author is “holding it up to irony and criticism” (Achebe 256). In Baumgartner’s Bombay, there is no clear authorial voice to guide the reader, but Desai does show the reader how all her characters are in a way mere human, and how they all view the world through “distorting lenses” (Cheyette 69). I will give an elaborate discussion of some of the characters of Baumgartner’s Bombay to emphasise how these characters contribute to a narrative which links the Partition to the Holocaust, and how violent histories have blown some of their lives to pieces. Let us start with the title character of Baumgartner.

Hugo Baumgartner, who is – as the title of the book already suggests – the main character of Baumgartner’s Bombay, is a very weak, ignorant and fearful person, and in many ways a ‘distorting lens’ of the story. One time, as a child, he had to go out to get a pat
of butter for his mother, because their maid Berthe had left. On his walk to the store, a route familiar from Sunday trips with his father to café Roseneck, suddenly everything and everyone had become threatening, even the objects in the store that had already become “the familiar landmarks of their street” (BB 23) now “all seemed covered by a layer of dust”: The bared fangs of the denture, so pink and white, seemed fierce rather than comic now, and the mouth-wash disgusting with the line of sediment rimming the jar in which it had stood for so long; at the tobacconist, the row of pipes were held choked and throttled by a wooden stand like a vice between the tins of tobacco that smelt musty and damp even through the pane of yellow glass; the newspaper kiosk had no flowers today, for some reason. (30)

On his way home, he has to take the staircase to get to their apartment, and the light has a habit of going out before he could reach the door, but on that night the light went out so abruptly that “Hugo was convinced of its malevolence, of its connivance with some evil conspirator who sat by some hidden spyhole on the staircase and watched” (31). When the little boy reached the top of the stairs, he was terror-struck by the frightening shade of the cloth bang hanging on the door knob for the baker to fill, he “lunged forward with a howl, throwing himself at the door”. Indeed it seems like a tale of a little child who has given himself a fright, because in the dark the figures on the street had seemed ominous: “the collars of their overcoats turned up and caps pulled down low over their eyes as if they wished to be faceless; . . . ; a woman with a raddled puce face who walked by without noticing him but muttering to herself crazily while waving invisible flies from her mouth” (30). But this fear becomes a part of Baumgartner’s life, and even when he gets older he sees everything through an anxious lens. In Venice, “[h]e walked to escape his fear and apprehension. Everywhere the sound of water lapping stone, of footsteps striking stone, so
that when he heard a sound that belonged to neither stone nor water, . . ., he stopped and searched for its source till his eyes found it” (59). So, even in Venice, the one place he will later describe as a place where he “could be at home” (81), fear gets the better of Baumgartner.

One of the most striking features of Baumgartner, our main character, is his inability to understand what is precisely going on in the world around him. During a conversation between Herr Pfuehl and his parents, when he was little, he thought that “they were actors on a stage, he the uncomprehending spectator” (40). And in the end, he still is ignorant: “Baumgartner slept, in ignorance. Ignorance was, after all, his element. Ignorance was what he had made his own. It was his country, the one he lived in with familiarity and resignation and relief” (219). I will give more examples of Baumgartner’s ignorance throughout this dissertation.

Baumgartner is the eternal outsider. From childhood on, he was unable to assimilate into a group. A clear example of this is the Christmas party at his first school. In this Catholic school, it was customary to hold a Christmas party, and to give the children “the presents that their parents had sent in for them” (BB 36), but because Hugo comes from a Jewish family neither Hugo nor his parents had known about this. When the teacher, Fräulein Klutke, got to his name on the list and saw that there was no gift for him, she reached out for the glass globe on top of the prickly fir tree, but although he found the ball extremely “tantalising” (35):

. . . Hugo could not move. Not one step. Not even his hands would stretch forwards. Instead, he locked them behind his back. Then, when the other children began to chant, ‘Hugo, it’s for you – it’s yours, Hugo,’ he hung his head and stared at his shoes, for nothing, nothing would persuade him that the twinkling glass globe was
his. He knew that it was not – that Fräulein Klutke had made it up on seeing that there was no other gift for him. The other children began to push and shove him towards the waiting Fräulein but this brought him so close to tears that she was obliged to call out, ‘Stop pushing him, children. If he doesn’t want it, we shall find another child to take it. Who is the smallest? Elizabeth Klein?’ and she handed it to her favourite.

Then the agony was over and he could collapse into the dark ditch of his shame. What was the shame? The sense that he did not belong to the picture book world of the fir tree, the gifts and the celebration. But no one had said that. Was it just that he sensed he did not belong to the radiant, the triumphant of the world? A strange sensation, surely, for a child. (36)

This passage illustrates how, even as a child, Baumgartner could not even accept this symbol of inclusion, because he felt he did not belong.

Even in Baumgartner’s second – Jewish – school, to his surprise he gets ragged about his big nose (“Baumgartner, Baum, hat ein Nase wie ein Daum! Baumgartner’s dumb, has a nose like a thumb” (38)), and when he has finally made a friend there, he stops going to school after the death of his father, and thus learns that “it is best not to form attachments” (Fielding 146). When Baumgartner leaves for India, he still wants to fit in, now mainly to convince his mother to come to India: “It seemed desperately important to belong and make a place for himself. He had to succeed in that if the dream of bringing his mother to India and making a home for her was to be turned into a reality” (BB 93-4). But we are told that this will not be an easy task because even in the British internment camp amongst fellow Jews he could not easily form bonds: “The habits of an only child, of an isolated youth in an increasingly unsafe and threatening land and then of a solitary foreigner in India had made Baumgartner hold to himself the fears he had about his mother” (109), and it was there that
he realised that “silence was his natural condition” (117). In the end, Baumgartner, or “the Madman of the Cats, the Billéwallah Pagal” (10) as the Indians call him, summarises it best himself:

Accepting – but not accepted; that was the story of his life, the one thread that ran through it all. In Germany he had been dark – his darkness had marked him the Jew, *der Jude*. In India he was fair – and that marked him the *firanghi*. In both lands, the unacceptable. Perhaps even where his cats were concerned, he was that – man, not feline, not theirs. (20)

In the survey of *Heart of Darkness* critiques, C.P Sarvan had contested Achebe’s claim that Marlow enjoyed Conrad’s complete confidence, and stated that Marlow’s portrait was drawn with quiet irony and a mocking humor which denotes distance between creator and character. I want to leave the discussion about *Heart of Darkness* aside, but take up this argument about the ironic depiction of Marlow, which, according to Sarvan, denotes distance between the author and Marlow. As we have seen already, Baumgartner is not depicted in a flattering way, he is actually pathetic, which becomes clear in the following passage; Baumgartner stands in front of the British officers, who have rounded up the detainees, undressed them, and separated them according to size and appearance, like cattle, making jeering remarks as they did so, and “[Baumgartner] found himself trying to join in the laughter, uncertain whether to do so would help or worsen matters. It turned out that this marked him something of an idiot” (108-9). Desai mockingly depicts Baumgartner as not very bright and even childlike, and when Baumgartner is free to leave the camp, he misses its order and comfort and is afraid to stand on his own feet. This depiction of Baumgartner as weak and pathetic helps Desai show the readers that we must always keep in mind that what we are reading are (mainly) Baumgartner’s acts and opinions (sometimes
also those of other characters, e.g. in the final chapter), and not those of the author. Almost every judgement passed, every portrayal of Baumgartner’s fellow man, is focalized through the eyes of a scared, pitiful man.

One of Hogan’s main arguments to profess that Anita Desai reduces the general population of India to the status of “semihuman savages” is the quotation of some of the descriptions by Baumgartner. Hogan quotes Baumgartner, who describes the Indian masses as: “So much naked skins, oiled and slithering with perspiration, the piscine bulge and stare of so many eyes” (18) and “families that lived in the cracks and crevices of the buildings like so many rats, or lice” (174). Hogan also refers to the description of individual Indians as dehumanizing and e.g. quotes Baumgartner’s description of Kantilal Sethia, the man whom Lotte/Lola married to save herself from internment as a German alien, as a “small brown monkey of a man” (102). Indeed, when these examples are lifted out of their contexts and put side by side, they seem very demeaning and racist.

First of all, let me contextualize just these three examples. The first example (“So much naked skins, oiled and slithering with perspiration, the piscine bulge and stare of so many eyes” (18)) is voiced when Hugo has left the Café the Paris, which he patronizes to get scraps for his cats, on the morning of the day of his death. Farrokh, the Parsi owner of the café had come over to Baumgartner to complain about a white tramp sitting in one of the corners of his café, and Baumgartner had felt “that he was pressed between the two, against his will, miserably” and when another customer, a Parsi as well, came in, he “made his escape” (18). When he reached the busy streets, he had wondered about this feeling of

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11 A Parsi is a “member of a group of followers in India of the Iranian prophet Zoroaster. The Parsis, whose name means ‘Persians,’ are descended from Persian Zoroastrians who emigrated to India to avoid religious persecution by the Muslims. They live chiefly in Bombay and in a few towns and villages mostly to the north of Bombay, but also at Karachi (Pakistan) and Bangalore (Karnataka, India). Although they are not, strictly speaking, a caste, since they are not Hindus, they form a well-defined community.” (“Parsi.”)
escape and thought: “How did one escape, caught in the traffic like a fish in a net teeming with a million other fish?” He actually saw himself as one of those fish, and the description of the fish is only a metaphor to describe the overcrowded streets that filled him with dread. A few pages further he said: “The crowd opposed him, opposed his escape, but protected him too, covered up for him as well.” The image of the net is also repeated, when Baumgartner is talking about himself and the fellow Jews who were not saved from the internment camp by the Jewish Relief Association, saying that they “were left to feel the net tightening over them” (107). This shows that the feeling of being a fish caught in a net was more a way of expressing his own fear of being in a mass of people, but because of his fear of people, not out of a feeling of superiority. And at the same time the net of the internment camp again seemed to protect Baumgartner after a while, because he knew what to expect in the internment camp.

The second example: “families that lived in the cracks and crevices of the buildings like so many rats, or lice” (174), is not a remark about Indian families in general, but it is a description of the living conditions of the families in the decrepit building in Calcutta, where Baumgartner goes to live after his internment in the British camp. It is an extract of a far bigger picture of a city on the decline because of the violence of the Partition. Baumgartner is not, as Hogan seems to imply, equating Indian families with rats, or lice.

The last example, when Baumgartner calls Kantilal Sethia – indeed, an Indian man – a “small brown monkey of a man” (102), it is because he is looking out for his friend Lotte, for whom he felt a fraternal love (although he could not imagine having Lotte as a sister in the old apartment in Berlin with his parents (208)). Baumgartner was concerned for Lotte’s well-being and opposed to her marriage of convenience with Sethia, who was far too old for her. (“’Ach, Lotte, who?’ he cried in pain. ‘The jeweller? Fifty years old or perhaps more?’” (102))
The descriptions of the other Indian men whom admired Lotte, and who may have seemed more suitable in Baumgartner’s eyes, were far better: “The handsome tea-planter . . . The dashing attaché of the Maharaja of Burdwan” (101).

These examples already prove that it is fairly easy to lift one sentence out of a book, and thus strip it from its original meaning. The reader also needs to keep in mind that these descriptions are made by a very fearful character. Furthermore, critics who regard Baumgartner as a “white man”, a “white subject” (da Silva) or as Baumgartner in the role of Conrad’s Russian or Marlow from Heart of Darkness (Hogan 39), participate in a reductive reading. Although Hogan stresses the fact that Baumgartner is a Jew, it is only to show that Baumgartner is represented in stereotypical terms as a dirty Jew who “rarely washed his clothes; they emanated a tick, cloudy odour that he himself found comforting in its familiarity but some considered offensive” (6). Indeed, Baumgartner seems like a very smelly and filthy man, but his declining personal hygiene has nothing to do with him being a Jew, because Baumgartner had not always been this careless about his personal hygiene. After one of his victories at the horseraces, Baumgartner had become very aware that he – unlike his partner, Chimanlal – had no family to celebrate with, and it was on one of Baumgartner’s walks home from the horse races that he had found and picked up his first maimed cat (195), which soon turned into a whole family of stray cats living in his apartment. From that moment onwards, he no longer seemed to care about his appearance and hygiene: “Baumgartner grew shabbier as he grew older, no longer noticing if his shoes had soles that flapped or if the buttons on his shirt were missing or even if they were clean and washed any more; after all, the cats greeted him exuberantly whether they were or not” (204). Maybe the smell even reminded Baumgartner of ‘the family’ he had waiting at home, and his new family made him give up on trying to fit in a society that had never accepted him. I agree
with K.D. Verma who reads Baumgartner’s relationship with his cats as a transposition of “[h]is self-reflective protest against the normative values of modern culture” into “psychological pity for the maimed cats, the injured, the victimized and the orphaned of humanity” (185), and I cannot start to comprehend why the cats would be “metonymic of the trap in which [Baumgartner] finds himself in India”, as da Silva suggests, seeing that the cats finally gave him the feeling that he had a home to go to, a reason to hurry home (BB 196). Hogan finds support for his claim that Desai depicts some jews as the protoypical ‘filthy jews’ by referring to the “grease-lined collar and patched and odorous jacket” of Reb Benjamin, but he fails to mention the “swampy odour of [the] damp loden coat” (30) of the female customer in the shop where Baumgartner goes to buy butter and the “woollen socks that were unravelling around the pressed-down heels of his slippers and gave off an odour very like eggs” (30) of the shop owner. Indeed, da Silva only quotes the mention of another Jew who is odorous, and seems to ignore these other examples of smelly people, because they are not explicitly identified as Jews.

Baumgartner comes from a Jewish family, but he knows little about the Jewish customs or the Jewish faith. When Baumgartner realises that his mother has died and wants to mourn her, it is much to his regret that he had not been “brought up as an orthodox Jew”, because then “he could have mourned her with ceremony; he would have followed the ancient customs, recited the ancient words of solace, and perhaps they would have helped to still the agony” (BB 165). Baumgartner knows little about his own faith and could only give “fumbled, embarrassed replies to Chimanlal’s questions about Judaism, about how a Jew could believe in the same Moses, Abraham or Jacob that the Christians did” and his “wary agnosticism” (205) contrasted sharply with Chimanlal’s unyielding faith in the Hindu goddess Lakshmi. Is Baumgartner a real Jew? In Germany, he knew that others thought of him as a
Jew but he had “not done so himself”. The fact that he finally regards himself as a Jew is because “Germany had taught him to regard himself as one” by “ejecting him” (62).

Hogan and da Silva, however, fail to see the far more important symbolism of Baumgartner’s position as a Jew. Baumgartner’s Jewish position actually makes him a victim of the Western world and his relation with Germany is one of exile, unlike Marlow and Conrad’s Russian who are representatives of Europe. Baumgartner does not feel superior to the Indians because he comes from Germany. He does not even want to be regarded as a white person: “It embarrassed him that anyone should think he ought to or would try to protect the white man” (17). At the end of the Second World War, the ensuing release from the British internment camp, and the death of his mother, he had already decided that he would not return to Germany: “Germany when it flourished had not wanted him and Germany destroyed would have no need of him either” (167). He even renounced his German nationality and became “a native of Hindustan” (181). To Baumgartner, it was an open-and-shut case that he was no longer an inhabitant of a country that had caused him so much suffering, but to the Indians he was still a white man and although Baumgartner had learned to distinguish many colours of natives Indians (20), he himself still knows very little about the political and religious tensions in India. I will return to these mutual difficulties to understand the other culture later on. As a German Jew, he is “the quintessential figure of exile for the narratives of Europe’s modernity” (Mufti 258), and instead of wanting to engage in a Western, colonial discourse, Baumgartner can be seen as a “figure of rebuke”, or as Desai states:

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. His life has no pattern; the pattern has been blown to bits by history. 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. (Desai, qtd. in Fielding: 145)

Baumgartner is, to Anita Desai, a symbol of another human being who gets crushed by the need to consolidate “national societies through the marginalization and uprooting of ‘other’ peoples” and, as the book shows us by interweaving the violent history of the Partition with the Holocaust, this is not just a European phenomenon but it applies “to all those places and moments in the modern era” (Mufti 258).

3.4.4 Venice: East and West

The difficulty to classify Jews as “part of European majoritarian history”, or as “a victimized minority” (Cheyette 54) – or in other words as black or white – seems to be picked up again by the insertion of Baumgartner’s visit to Venice. Throughout history Venice has held a long tradition “as a hybrid space which most clearly contests Europe’s supposedly self-evident superiority” (61). Because of its location, it has functioned as the “gatepost between Europe and the East and between Europe and Africa” (Sennet, qtd. in Cheyette: 61), and because of its position as a city of trade, bringing in products from both the East and Africa, it also “attracted a good many marginal peoples who were barred from official citizenship” (Cheyette 61). Throughout the Victorian period, Venice had been set up as an example of the colonial anxiety, which we have mentioned in our survey of Heart of Darkness critiques. This colonial anxiety means that they feared the degenerative effects for their own society when coming into contact with members of a primitive society. Venice was “an enchanted place in the throws of decay and decline”, and one of the most extreme representation of Venice as the “irrevocable decline of Europe” can be found in the T.S. Eliot’s poem “Burbank with a
Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar”, in which he “explicitly compares the former grandeur of Venice with the utter confusion generated by the contemporary bestial Jew in the guise of Bleistein, Sir Ferdinand Klein and, ultimately, Shylock” (61). So in this poem, the decline of Venice – a ‘grand’ European city – is actually caused by the Jew – the primitive society. When we compare the claim of this poem with da Silva’s accusation that Baumgartner’s Bombay confirms “the view that the white man/woman can enter India . . . only at the expense of his or her fall into chaos” (knowing that with the white man/woman da Silva referred to Hugo Baumgartner and Lotte, both German Jews), our suspicion that da Silva has not grasped the ambiguity of the Jewish figure (much like some of the Indians and British officers in our story could not grasp the ambiguity because they were ignorant of the importance of the Jewish element in ‘German Jew’, and were only interested in Baumgartner’s nationality) is again reaffirmed.

But, in the Victorian period, Venice was to signify not only the fears, but also the desires of a hybrid history, as well as “an idealised form of European colonial order” (Cheyette 65). Much later, Georg Simmel, a German-Jewish social theorist, “was to construct Venice as a site of ‘absolute ambiguity’ . . . and as the example of modernity” (67), and it is this construction of Venice that Desai uses when she employs this setting in her story.

Baumgartner has to spend a week in Venice to wait for the boat that will take him to Bombay. In a local trattoria, a Jewish woman picks up on his problem to choose from a foreign menu, and kindly suggests him to try the cannelloni. When Baumgartner stares at her Hebrew newspaper, she explains that she lives in the Jewish quarter, and even asks him to come over, but “Hugo began to shift in his chair in unease” (BB 62). The woman leaves while he is having his meal, and he loses track of her and stumbles across an ‘eastern market’, which made him think:
Venice was the East, and yet it was Europe too; it was that magic boundary where the two met and blended . . . He realised it only now: that during his constant wandering, his ceaseless walking, he had been drawing closer and closer to this discover of that bewitched point where they became one land of which he felt himself the natural citizen. (63)

It is quite striking that it is in this Venice, where ‘east’ and ‘west’ (or ‘black’ and ‘white’) meet, that he has an encounter with this kind young lady and tries to follow her, which is a hint towards a true inclusion into a society. Cheyette explains the fact that Baumgartner never reaches the Jewish ghetto as a “telling lack of closure”, because “this would have been a too easy resolution of [Baumgartner’s] incommensurable identity” (69). But Baumgartner has come to cherish the memory of Venice. It is this nodal point of East and West that Baumgartner still remembers many years later when he is talking to Lotte about where they could have gone after the war: “If I could go, if I could leave, then I would go to Venice ... it was both East and West, both Europe and Asia – maybe, in such a place, I could be at home” (BB 81). And after Kurt, the young German who will kill him in the end, has told him (improbable) stories of all the places he has visited, Baumgartner again mentions Venice as a “wonderful” place, but Kurt mocks him by saying that “Venice is only drains” (160). This shows how Kurt’s mind had been instilled with a feeling of superiority.

3.4.5 The British Internment Camp

When Herr Pfuehl takes over his father’s business, Baumgartner travels to Bombay with a letter of Pfuehl to do business with Pfuehl’s Indian wood suppliers. Baumgartner first meets the Hindu Chimanlal in Bombay, who refers Baumgartner to an associate in Calcutta, the Muslim Habibullah. Habibullah gives him a place in his office and Baumgartner can get
started (BB 91). Soon after that Baumgartner, in a strange twist of events, gets arrested as a German national, and he is taken to a detention camp.

Hogan is of the opinion that Baumgartner’s forced stay in this British internment camp is Desai’s way to depict British India as “a chaos of malign incompetence, portrayed to itself and to the home population as civilizing order” (37), much like Conrad’s Belgian Congo. He argues that, in reality, within a couple of months all German Jews were released from the camps, and that the Jews who were detained were feared to be Nehru-allied “Jewish communists” (38). He refers to Katherine Smith who has argued that Desai’s primary source for the internment scenes was Heinrich Harrer’s Seven Years in Tibet.

In my opinion, it is less important to question the historical accuracy of the scene because we are still dealing with a literary work, and Desai does mention some Jews getting out of the camp because they appealed to the Jewish Relief Association. It is more important to focus on what the scene has contributed to the book. First of all, it is “[s]ignificant for Desai’s purpose . . . that both mother and son spend the war in a camp – the routine solution in the twentieth century to the crisis of statelessness and displacement – the former for being a Jew in Germany and the latter for being a German outside it” (Mufti 252). In the camp, Baumgartner quickly becomes aware that the British guard of his barrack, is of the same kind – the ruling kind – as Schmidt, “a blond and silent man” (BB 104) who turns out to be a Nazi (105). This is an allusion to the unequal division of the power in the world (Mufti 252). Although this British guard seems very aware of the difference between Schmidt and Baumgartner, the British man in charge of checking their papers “refused absolutely to see them as different, separated individuals” (BB 104). To him, Baumgartner is merely a German, and his plea “Yes, but of Jewish origin, therefore a refugee – ” (105) does not find any hearing. I will return to what this says about the British later on. Because the British
commandant does not know what to do with them and seems to withdraw, “empty spaces were allowed into which others could step” (108) and Baumgartner saw “how a certain group, a certain kind of German took over” (115). So the Jews are again subjected to the Nazi regime, and it is “through this displacement of the German-Jewish problematic to (colonial) Indian soil, that Desai approaches the question of the meaning of the genocide for modernity” (Mufti’s emphasis, Mufti 252). The Nazi regime that takes over is authoritarian and utilitarian:

But with it went an authoritarianism that really came into its own, really triumphed on that hellish parade-ground under the summer sun. Whereas the British commandant had only half-heartedly carried out what was a mere formality, almost a mockery of a true ceremony, the Nazis seized upon it with an authority that was awesome. To Baumgartner, at least, awesome. In no time, the men were lined up, the lines straightened, the men straightened, mouths opened, and a sound drawn out of them that seemed to answer the force of the summer sun, the force of the dust winds, with an equal force. (BB 115)

The Jews are forced to sing ‘Deutschland, Deutschland über alles’ and to say ‘Heil Hitler!’ and it is very clear that the camp “was an extension of” (116) the regime in Germany.

A group of younger, impassioned members of the Jews refuse one day to participate in the line up, and get beaten up. Only after several days the British commander intervenes, and places them in barracks at another end of the camp, but he is still ignorant of what is going on: “‘Why is everyone so excited? This happens all the time in our public schools – it doesn’t mean much, just a trashing’”. The remark of one of the Jews “‘And what shall we call our new home?’ . . . ‘Auschwitz or Theresienstadt?’” (117) is a direct charge that links the British regime to the Nazi regime, because both regimes throw the Jews in a camp, and Mufti refers to Sartre’s famous account of their mutual dialectic:
the [British state] wishes to destroy him as a man and leave nothing in him but the
Jew, the pariah, the untouchable; the [Third Reich] wishes to destroy him as a Jew
and leave nothing in him but the man, the abstract and universal subject of the rights
of man and the rights of the citizen. (qtd. in Mufti: 253-4)

Because of the British internment camp and the displacement of the German regime to
colonial, Desai is able to insert the British “into its problematic, therefore removing the
former from within the confines of a single nation-state and restoring to it the horizon of
(European) modernity as a whole” (253). So although the British commandant shies away
from treating the detainees badly, he does collaborate with the Germans by letting them
take over the camp: “The Nazis amongst the Germans, who seemed to be running the camp
– on behalf of or in collaboration with the British” (BB 118).

When the detainees hear of the defeat of Germany, they are not sure what is going
to happen with them, and they decide to go through with a planned concert. But, instead of
starting to play, the orchestra starts singing the song of ending and defeat, ‘Ich hat’ ein
Kamerad’. Baumgartner “wanted to shout ‘Stop!’ He wanted to tell them it was their defeat,
not his, that their country might be destroyed but this meant a victory, terribly late, far too
late, but at last the victory... Couldn’t even victory appear in colours other than that of
defeat” (135). This is a particularly harrowing scene, because even when the Third Reich had
been defeated, the Jews were still not able to rejoice. They are not immediately let free, and
are even confronted with the grieve of the Nazi Germans, while for the Jews (and their
families still living in Germany) it should have meant the end of prosecution and the
Holocaust. The extract where the members of the orchestra do not take up their
instruments, and Baumgartner watches them “like a scene in a play – as if actors had
rehearsed their parts and were now playing them on the stage” (134), is similar to the scene
from Baumgartner’s childhood, when Herr Pfuehl tells Hugo’s mother that she cannot keep
coking these lavish dinners, because it was no longer easy to find customers for their
furniture store. This can be seen as a first ‘defeat’ (“She sat with her napkin pressed to her
mouth, choking”), and Baumgartner had much in the same way “stared at them as though
they were actors on a stage, he the uncomprehending spectator” (40).

Da Silva is of the opinion that Desai is very condensing towards the Indian outcasts,
like Jagu and his family, to whom I will return in section 3.3.5. I have already shown before
that this claim is false because Desai clearly indicates that the living conditions of these
Indians is because of the famine after (and during) the Second World War or the forced
migrations characteristic of the Partition, and not because the Indians are primitive. Da Silva,
however, elaborates on this claim and says that his point is emphasised by the juxtaposition
of these Indians with the white man, “albeit in the more complex figure of the marginalized
Jew”, in the internment camp who is still able “to remain human in the most inhumane
conditions”, proof of this is the “genteel – and gentle – nature of the prisoners’ pastimes”.
So, according to da Silva, the depiction of the Indian outcasts as primitive serves as a foil to
the dignified manner in which ‘the Europeans’ deal with similar, or even worse (“the most
inhumane”), conditions. This is comparable to the Achebe’s accusations. I do not agree with
the juxtaposition that da Silva suggests. I do not wish to diminish the awful conditions in the
camp, but extracts from the book prove that there was enough food in the internment
camp, although “the meat was uneatable mutton that stank, and instead of eggs there was a
dry yellow powder that looked like mustard gone mouldy and tasted of dust” (119). The only
reason that there was time to engage in these pastimes, is because the Jews were excluded
from most camp duties after the British had intervened, and separated the Jews from the
Germans, which made the Jews idle. I do not think that the reader can compare these living
conditions in the internment camp with those of people who needed to survive with the items they had been able to take with them, before fleeing, and the things they found in the streets. In my opinion, my interpretation of Jagu and his family—as another character, whose life is destroyed by a violent history—in 3.3.7 is far more tenable.

Hogan also cites the extract where Baumgartner, while working in the fields, witnesses Indian women from the nearby village rolling out balls of dung to let it dry as fuel to cook their meals and calls their lives “so primitive, so basic and unchanging” in “the absence of choice and history” (111), and Hogan links this to Marlow’s observations about his crew: “I don’t think a single one of them had any clear idea of time, as we at the end of countless ages have. They still belonged to the beginnings of time – had no inherited experience to them” (HoD 56). When it comes to Heart of Darkness, C.P. Sarvan was of the opinion that the reader needs to keep in mind the discrepancy between e.g. the alleged primitiveness of the boilerman in contrast with the appearance and the actions of the ‘civilized’ men (284) who were emptying their cartridges into the bushes—but not hitting anything—and how one of them was dancing at the thought of having revenged Kurtz’s death like a “bloodthirsty little gingery beggar” (HoD 68). So, according to this critic, Conrad meant to criticize the white men who felt superior, but whose actions seem very primitive. Baumgartner, on the other hand, actually admires that simple life and he began to envy that there is no choice and history in their lives, because, in his case, history acted as a “juggernaut . . . something that once it’s set into motion can’t be stopped and crushes everything in its way” (Desai, qtd. in Fielding 114), which made his own life seem “hopelessly tangled and unsightly” (BB 111). So the juxtaposition of these people without history and Baumgartner as a victim of history, is actually a reprimand to a Eurocentric feeling of superiority.
3.4.6 Calcutta in Flames: Habibullah and Sushil as Victims of the Partition

Desai’s Baumgartner’s Bombay is full of displaced and exiled persons and victims of genocidal violence. We have already mentioned Baumgartner, his mother and Lotte, but Desai also depicts victims of another violent history, namely the Partition of British India. Because Baumgartner comes in contact with these Indian victims of another genocide, Desai shows how the suffering caused by these events is universal, and she is able to uncover analogies between the Holocaust and the Partition.

After the Second World War and Baumgartner’s subsequent release from the detention camp, he returns to find that war is raging in Calcutta. He hurries over to his former hotel, to see if there is any news for him from his mother, only to find that the new manager has kept the letters from his mother but that there is “none dated later than February 1941” (164). He cannot bear the thought of living in a luxurious house while his mother has probably died during the war, and he takes up residence in a great decayed house in Calcutta. There was nothing in that building or around it that was not broken or decayed or stained (165). Baumgartner, who is mourning his mother, makes no attempt to return to the Calcutta life of before the war, because

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. (165-6)

Baumgartner is clearly struggling with survivor’s guilt. This extract underscores how the setting of the utterly devastated Calcutta is a metaphor for the death of his mother and the
end of the Germany of his childhood, and it thus uncovers “an uncanny and subterranean link between that crisis of minority and statelessness “elsewhere” and this partitioning of self and society” (Mufti 255). So the violence and the consequences of the Partition are the proper setting for the consequences of the Holocaust, although Baumgartner is still too ignorant to realise what the Partition really entails, as we will see below.

Baumgartner realises that he still needs money to survive and he goes to look for his former business partner Habibullah. Baumgartner fears that he will not find his business partner in the devastated city, but Habibullah has stayed on in Calcutta “through the threats of a Japanese attack that had made thousands flee” (166), but his life and business had never been the same since. But Baumgartner cannot grasp what the pre-partition violence meant for Habibullah: “Now the war was over, Baumgartner gently suggested, . . . , he hoped to get back to his former business” and Habibullah has to clarify: “‘What business, sahib, what business?’ . . . ‘Everything finished, gone’” (167). As I have explained before, in the camp the detainees had only listened to the overseas news and they did not really know what had happened in India in the meantime. Habibullah’s words about the faith of his family, “For us – India is finished” (168) summarize the tragic chapter of the ethnic cleansing that accompanied Indian independence. Habibullah explains to the uninformed Baumgartner that the “Congress-wallahs” want the Muslims out, that the British will go and that the Muslim League (Habibullah says “this man Jinnah, and his party”, and Jinnah was the leader of the Muslim League at that time) urges the Muslims to leave. And then he exclaims: “But – how? I have so much – my family, my home, my business – what will happen to it all, sahib?” (168) This extract exposes how the ‘glorious’ idea of an independent Muslim country, Pakistan, actually shattered the lives of many individual Muslims, and how – if they arrived in Pakistan – these Muslims had to start all over again.
For Baumgartner, there is no more work in Calcutta, and Habibullah advises him to go to Bombay, because “In Bombay you can do business and not be stabbed in the back when you are going home at night. Bombay had no war, no famine” (169). (Ironically, of course, Baumgartner will die by getting stabbed in Bombay.) Baumgartner is not convinced to move again, because “the very thought of having to move exhausted him” (169). In this excerpt, the reader is confronted with the sentiments of Habibullah, whose life is uprooted because of the Partition, and the sentiments of Baumgartner, who has already been uprooted when he had to leave Germany, and know again Baumgartner faces a forced departure because of another violent history. Now it is Habibullah who fails to comprehend what the Second World War and the Holocaust entailed for Baumgartner, and why it would be a problem for Baumgartner to go to Bombay, and start working with Chimanlal: “Are you not English, European sahib? Have you no European connections?” Baumgartner has to remind him that Europe has had a war and that his country is also “finished” (169). There is a mutual ignorance about the history of the other: “But Habibullah had no more conception of Baumgartner’s war, of Europe’s war than Baumgartner had of affairs in Bengal, in India” (169). This extract shows that the violent histories of the Partition and the Holocaust are very different histories and they can never be equated, but at the same time the reader is a witness of how the destructive effects of these violent histories can intersect and seem very similar, and how victims could find comfort in their mutual faith, if only they would be aware of the bigger picture.

In Calcutta, the situation was only getting worse. The streets were taken over by processions, which could turn violent in an instance, but otherwise these streets were deserted except for barricades. On one of Baumgartner’s walks in Calcutta, he is halted at a barricade. He does not understand what is going on, and a fellow onlooker explains that the
The mob was protesting “against the trial of the twenty thousand men who fought in the I.N.A.” (172). When the onlooker realises that Baumgartner does not know what the I.N.A., he is furious: “You do not know, about the Indian National Army and the war it fought against the British? In Burma and China? On the side of the Japanese?” (173) Baumgartner begins to realise what is going on and that he does not want to be a part of another war:

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. (173)

This excerpt seems to universalize the problem of war, and speak out against the insulation of the different wars, because one cannot just keep wars separate. Although these wars are different and not to be equated (“His war was not their war.”), they are also part of one great web, linked by their violent nature.

Baumgartner stays in the dilapidated house in Calcutta for more than a year (172), but as he has no work anymore, and the streets are dangerous because of the threatening political atmosphere, more and more he stays in. After a while, “his anonymity and the anonymity of his neighbours” break down and “identities, individualities [are] revealed” (175). This is how Baumgartner meets Sushil, an Indian Marxist. When Sushil was younger, the British had exiled him to the Andaman islands for thirteen years because of a bomb attack, and there he had become a Marxist. Sushil has an implacable hatred for the British, and when he finds out that Baumgartner is a German (at the time, he had not changed his nationality yet), Sushil “lit up with admiration as if in the presence of a war hero” because Sushil believes that if the Germans had defeated the British, “they would have helped Japan
to drive them out of India” (177). Again Baumgartner tries to explain that he is not a Nazi, but a Jew, but Sushil cannot understand what this actually means, because he “had renounced religion for politics and had no interest in Judaism” (177). This is again an example of ignorance, when it comes to the dividing lines of another community. Sushil is also a flawed character, he refers to bombs and guns as games (178), but he is trying to change his ways and he wants to become a radio mechanic (177). One night, Baumgartner hears guns firing and sees how “men in theatrically blood-soaked clothes . . . with torches and knives, screaming those slogans of religious warfare that were raised everywhere now” enter the building, and when he hears a male scream, “somehow more intolerable than a woman’s or a child’s”, he climbs up to the loft, meeting the marauders as they run from the scene and he finds Sushil’s body: “The blood streamed” (179). Sushil has been murdered, and for Baumgartner Sushil’s blood becomes his mother’s blood: “In his sleep, in his dreams, the blood was Mutti’s, not the boy’s. Yet his mother – so small, weak – could not have spilt so much blood. Or had she? The blood ran, ran over the floor and down the stairs, soaking his feet which stood in it helplessly” (179). This excerpt again uncovers the multidirectional memories of violent histories and proves that these memories are already present in the people’s mind, as we have seen in section 2.3. It is important to become aware of these links because, as we have also seen, the use of the multidirectionality of memory can transform the meaning of being a survivor of a traumatic history as well as an engaged citizen in the present.

After the murder of Sushil, he goes to check in on Habibullah and finds that Habibullah is gone, and that his office has been ransacked. As we have mentioned before, Habibullah’s disappearance established a multidirectional link to how Baumgartner could not find out how ‘Mütti’ (his mother) was doing, and although Habibullah had already told
him that he was planning to leave to Dacca (168), the violent atmosphere leaves
Baumgartner wondering if Habibullah is safe (182). After Baumgartner leaves the raided
office of Habibullah, he feels “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. Endless war.
Eternal war” (180). Baumgartner feels overtaken by another war and by another loss – both
Sushil and Habibullah are gone –, and he decides to leave Calcutta and go to Bombay.

3.4.7 Bombay: Chimanlal, Jagu and Farrokh

In Bombay, Baumgartner can again start working with the help of Chimanlal, the Hindu
associate of Habibullah. Hogan is very critical of Desai’s depiction of Chimanlal, referring to
the excerpt where Baumgartner decides “that he would never fathom Chimanlal’s motives,
that under all that bland guilelessness there was an unfathomable guile” (191). Hogan calls it
a “stereotype of the endlessly duplicitous Asian” (41). Desai’s description of Chimanlal is
indeed very critical, e.g. “Chimanlal’s thinking was of a much more ignorant, uninformed and
mercenary order” (183), but at the same times Chimanlal is also a loving father who adores
“his only son and heir” (192). At the sight of his only son, Chimanlal is no longer a dignified
business man, but a proud father who “chuckled and clucked and made a series of bird or
animal-like sounds” (192). The reader is reminded of how Baumgartner’s own father, a man
with “only decorum” in his behaviour (25), would give his son a taste of his beer on their
Sunday outings and, at the sight of his son gasping and withdrawing “froth-moustached”,
would start laughing as he never laughed at home (24), and how that same father would
playfully switch their headgear “so that Hugo’s small head almost vanished, turning him into
a headless gnome while his little cap flew up and perched like a saucer between his father’s
scarlet jug-ears” (25). On India’s Independence day, Baumgartner, who has noticed
Chimanlal’s adoration for his son, buys the little boy a present. Chimanlal, thrilled with the gesture, invites Baumgartner to his sole vice: the horse races. Again we are reminded of how, thirty years before, Baumgartner could not go to the horse races with his father and his business partner, Herr Pfuehl. This time the link is made explicit because Baumgartner remembers how he had struck out at his mother, who tried to console her son, who is furious that his father had not taken him with him to the horse races, by playing a game of ‘Hoppe, hoppe, Reiter’ (193).

Chimanlal is also a devout Hindu, and, as I have mentioned before, this is contrasted with Baumgartner who “had never left anything in the hands of the gods” (185). At first, Baumgartner found Chimanlal’s devotion to Lakshmi “disquieting”, and doubted “if Lakshmi would guide him as well while he conducted Chimanlal’s latest ventures” (185), but, to his surprise, Baumgartner was getting business done so that he pleased Chimanlal, who bowed “to his garlanded goddess in thanksgiving so profound, so humble that it made Baumgartner look away in embarrassment” (186). In the subsequent section of the book, Baumgartner is stranded in a barren setting because he needs to wait for a train, and he sets out for a walk. On the top of a low hill, he finds a cave. I think that it quickly becomes clear that he persuades himself that there is more to this pile of rocks than meets the eye. At first, “[h]e was, in fact, not quite certain that it was a temple at all”, and he had already noted that “[i]t was clearly no temple of famed carvings and fabulous idols such as heaped the rest of the country with their artistic splendour”(188). More and more, he convinces himself that there is something special about the cave: there is a trail going up to it, and he feels like something stopped him in the centre of the chamber. And then he notices two black rock with a red powder, or paste on it, and something “fragile and dry lay curved around it”. He felt like the chamber held a secret, but there was no one there to tell him what it was, and again the
feeling of not belonging and fear takes over. This is why he begins thinking about death and human sacrifice. He scares himself by thinking that “[o]ne read of them, from time to time, in the papers. Even of cannibalistic rites, tantric magic” (190). In the end, he feels again, like he is ejected: “Indigestible, inedible Baumgartner. The god had spat him out. Raus, Baumgartner, out. Not fit for consumption, German or Hindu, human or divine” (190). This extract shows that, maybe because he is grateful for his (moderate) success or because he sees how much optimism and strength Chimanlal derives from his religion, he tries to connect with something divine, but again he feels that, even though he had become a native of Hindustan, he is not accepted. Of course, it is difficult to join a religion by just going into a cave, without knowing anything about the religion, except for rumours. This again underscores Baumgartner’s ignorance when it comes to other cultures.

After Baumgartner’s ‘retirement’ (206), because Chimanlal’s son had taken over the business after the death of his father, and did not want to have anything to do with Baumgartner anymore, the streets of Bombay are overcrowded because of a migrant population from the fields and villages. Baumgartner remarks “[t]here seemed to be drought every year in the land” (207), referring to the British newspapers who had said that the famine in Calcutta was because of drought, but in fact these migrants are probably people running away from the genocidal violence, to a big city where they are ‘protected’ from e.g. attacks from Muslim gangs. One family, the family of Jagu, takes up residency across the length of the pavement just outside Hira Niwas, Baumgartner’s apartment building, and the reactions of the tenants are according to Hogan “an account of Kurtzian reactions” (Hogan 42): “the tenants stopped on their way in or out to express their horror and contempt for the ragged creatures who hardly seemed human to the citizens of the urbis et prima of the west” (207). But these reactions are also countered by the reactions of Baumgartner, who
realises that he is just lucky: “Baumgartner . . . shuffled past with his head bowed and his eyes averted – not to avoid contamination as the others did, but to hide his shame at being alive, fed, sheltered, privileged” (207). This too could have been his faith if e.g. Chimanlal had not given Baumgartner a job. Baumgartner had already wondered why Chimanlal had done this, “why he took up a homeless foreigner, not even one with the prestige of having been a erstwhile ruler, a part of the colonial might and power, but simply a stray, a pariah in the eyes of the raj, clearly the most powerless of all” (183).

As we have already established, this novel is full of references to displaced persons such as these impoverished rural migrants. This poverty is not just the case in India, because in his recollection of the Germany of the late 1930s, Baumgartner had also mentioned people who had it far worse than his own family, because although their furniture store got less customers, “they were not as poor as others were. Unlike the men who searched the dustbins for chicken bones and slept on benches under sheets of Berliner Zeitung, or the women who stood on the streets because there was nowhere else to go, their scent reeking of cheapness” (40). So this comparison between poverty in different cultures proves, as Mufti has pointed out, Desai insistence that “the situation of the truly “homeless” in modern culture is not merely incidental to that culture” (249).

Baumgartner admits to himself that “he had fears – nightmares – of their coming after him one night. Why should they not? They saw him bring bags of food, knew he had a wallet in his pocket, wore a watch on his wrist . . . and he wondered what prevented them from grabbing him by his neck and stripping him in the dark” (145). Hogan compares this to Marlow who does not understand why the unfed cannibals, who are part of the crew on his ship, do not kill and eat him. I do not feel that Baumgartner’s fear has anything to do with a fear for the ‘Other’, as in the primitive culture, but more with a sense of guilt, because he
felt “overloaded with belongings, and he felt their accusation whenever he passed” (145). It is this guilt that explains Baumgartner’s former reluctance to carry the silver trophies from the horse races home, “stared at by all the goggling onlookers on the pavement” (195).

Da Silva says that Baumgartner’s fear for the Indian mendicants is expressed throughout, but actually Baumgartner says himself that it is not fear he feels: “feeling the hairs on the back of his neck rise, a brief prickle of – not exactly fear, but unease, an apprehension. He knew the absolute degradation of their lives; he knew the violence it bred – the brawling in the night, the beating, the weeping” (7). This shows that Baumgartner is fearful, but he does not fear the Indians because he thinks they are part of a primitive culture, and they could turn ferocious and attack him at any time, but he is fearful of his fellow man in general, and also fearful of what a person can stoop to when confronted with absolute degradation. Baumgartner’s feeling of fear for Jagu is also intensified by a former incident between him and Jagu. When Jagu and his family had started living there, Baumgartner had intervened when Jagu, in a drunken condition, was beating his wife: “[Baumgartner] hurried up to him and caught him by his shoulder only to be flung off and hurled against the wall” (8). Excerpts like “[this family] was a familiar sight to Baumgartner, as he was to him, with his plastic bag in his hand and his shoes slit at the sides for comfort” (7), and Jagu referring to Baumgartner as “[t]hat beggar who eats other men’s leftovers” (222) show that Jagu and Baumgartner are not that different, “each recognizes in the other a trace, a shadow, or a whisper of his own degradation” (Mufti 259).

The portrayal of Jagu also reminded me of Lotte, a former German dancer who agreed to a marriage of convenience with an Indian to escape internment, but who now – in her own words – has become “sloppy” (72), another example of a character on the fringes of society. Jagu is described as “the man who always lay in a drunken stupor at this time of the
morning” (6), a bit like the “drink-sodden Lotte” (67) who in the same way always crawls in bed in the afternoon because of the feni, an Indian liquor. Once, when Lotte was drunk, she went into hysterics when the children from her building had thrown fish scales and prawn tails on her head, and “even the garage hands were impressed and sent for the police” (67). This excerpt is another example of how a person’s degradation, in this case Lotte’s, can breed violence.

In Bombay, Baumgartner patronizes the Café de Paris, to get scraps of food for his cats. It is in this café that Farrokh Cama, the Parsi café owner, confides in Baumgartner, because he hopes Baumgartner can help him to get rid of a young European drug tourist, who is, according to Farrokh, just another firanghi (21) like Baumgartner. To Hogan, Baumgartner plays “a sort of unwilling Marlow to Farrokh’s company manager” (39) and Farrokh “estends the vilification of mystical Hinduism” by e.g. characterizing Hindu hermitages as drugs dens. First of all, I agree that Baumgartner does not want to interfere with the matter: “pressed between the two, against his will, miserably” (18), but, in my opinion, the comparison between Marlow and Baumgartner is not successful. Marlow chose to travel to the Congo out of an adventurous spirit and a “hankering” to go visit “the most blank spot” on the maps he had marvelled at when he was little (HoD 22), Baumgartner, however, is the plaything of fortune and he compares himself to a hermit (BB 11). It is the thought that he will need to find new benefactors to supply scraps for his cats – his family – that drives him to talk to Kurt (138), and finally to take Kurt to his apartment.

Secondly, it is true that Farrokh’s harangue is not flattering for the white man (“No longer black man killing white man for money, Bommgartner sahib, it is now white man killing and robbing black man. And white man killing white man too” (16)), and the Hindu culture, but the depiction of Farrokh’s character is also a very critical one. Farrokh, who is a
Parsi, feels that he is superior to his non-Parsi fellow man. He normally “remained aloof from all those of an inferior race” (12). He has a “sardonic” smile and his eyes are “bottomless pits of a cynic and a melancholic” (9). Although Farrokh’s religion tells him to “give, give” (14), it seems that his number one priority is avarice, as the following extract underscores: “It was almost impossible to read the faded sign he had hung beneath it: TRUST IN GOD, or the handwritten label attached to the sign: Terms Strictly Cash” (11). If he does donate money, it is only out of a fear to lose clients and not out of a sense of compassion: “All the time we are giving, giving . . . to the beggar, to the leper, to the fakir who comes to my restaurant with tin can and marigold garland and snake round his neck so I give, give him money to go away and not trouble my customers” (14). Finally, Baumgartner, who was never one to stand up for himself, takes Kurt with him to his apartment at Farrokh’s instigation, and it cost him his life. In the next section, I will discuss what Baumgartner’s death at the hands of Kurt means.

### 3.4.8 Kurt

After Baumgartner meets Kurt in the Café de Paris, Baumgartner cannot stop thinking about him. He realises that this is because he had know that the boy was German, Baumgartner had “smelt the German in him like a cat might smell another and know its history, its territory” (21). To Baumgartner, their “encounter” is indeed “overdetermined, by the history of their common society of origin” (Mufti 250). The moment he had seen the German boy, he had been catapulted back to his days in the camp, when the only exchange between a Jew like Baumgartner and a certain type of fair haired boy like Kurt was a look that had been “the blades of knives slid quickly and quietly between ribs” (BB 21). And although he had realised that “there was no longer a reason for such an exchange” (21), he thought:
[t]hen why had this boy to come after him, in lederhosen, in marching boots, striding over the mountains to the sound of the Wantervogels 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. (21)

It is clear that Baumgartner is still struggling to work through his trauma from the internment camp. When Kurt sees the name “H. Baumgartner” on his door, “[t]he name makes his mouth twist with sarcasm, with ferocity. To come half-way across the world and meet H. Baumgartner, what an irony” (BB 217), but Kurt does not seem aware of the violent history that caused Baumgartner’s flee from Germany. According to Mufti, this extract shows that

[t]he Europe of post-sixties generational conflict, in which one generation of Europeans rejects the Eurocentric legacy of the previous one – a rejection here embodied in Kurt’s countercultural relationship to India – is subjected to a sharp critique here for failing to confront and comprehend its own history. (Mufti 250).

For Baumgartner, the Holocaust was so sweeping that he cannot be confronted with anything from Germany without being fearful, but Kurt’s life seems unaffected by it.

Kurt’s countercultural relationship to India, mentioned in the previous quote, is most apparent in his tales about his journey. According to Hogan, Kurt’s tales e.g. about the Hindu spiritual discipline yoga are “a standard colonialist view, that the religious practices of the colonized peoples are demonic, that their gods are Satan and his cohorts” (44). Hogan does state that Kurt is not a trustworthy voice, but at the same time he says that there is nothing to contradict Kurt’s views. This is similar to Achebe’s accusation that Conrad has not “hint[ed] at an alternative frame of reference that shows the reader how Conrad does not agree with his characters’ opinions and actions” (256). In his opinion, these degrading
depictions of Hindu culture are even enforced by Farrokh. Da Silva also quotes some of fragments of Kurt’s stories and he judges that “[b]y pre-empting the satire of ethnographic discourse it sets out in the first place, the narrative in effect compounds the view that India is all that Kurt experiences and perhaps much more of the same.”

I have already established that Farrokh feels superior to another culture, and that his racist views are mainly out of a fear of the effect of mendicants patronizing his business. In my opinion, Kurt’s account is actually too exaggerated, which shows the reader that Kurt’s stories are actually fictional. The fact that he tells his stories after he comes out of the toilet, where he has clearly taken drugs (Baumgartner finds syringes and phials afterwards, BB 214) only confirms my opinion. If we look at the passage about yoga in more detail, we read that the Indians “had driven him out, with sticks and slippers, as an emissary of the devil” (157), which is a hint that Kurt had not understood what yoga actually means, that he defiles yoga, and that the swamis, who are Indians who master the art of yoga, want him out. Other extracts that show how Kurt has vitiated the truth are e.g. when he recounts how he had entered in a procession, and whipped himself with “knotted thongs and slivers of blades inserted into the knots, chanting, ‘Hassan – Hosain – Hassan – Hosain’, while he cut and lashed his body till the blood ran”, and gives the absurd answer: “I make myself whole again and again” (159) when Baumgartner asks where his scars are, or that he had “met and grappled with a yeti” (160), which is – by all accounts – still a figure of legends. Baumgartner does object in between the tales by saying: “It is all dreams, my friend, mad dreams” (158), and I do believe it is clear that Kurt is overexaggerating, and that it is clear that this is not the real India.

In the end, Kurt stabs Baumgartner to death and steals the silver prizes. This tragic end is very significant. First of all, Mufti is right in stating that the fact “that this young
German killer of the old Jew escapes detection and capture is itself a telling comment on the claim to progress in postwar Europe and the evasion of historical responsibility that is implicit in this countercultural rejection of a classical European culture” (251). The fact that Kurt is, however, also an outcast who would not be accepted in Germany (“In Germany he would have been a delinquent, a criminal” (BB 161)) also shows that Desai is not saying that the entire German population is (or was) anti-Semitic, but that she is critical of a society who produces such outcasts like Kurt. Kurt is also the embodiment of a feeling of superiority, and racial thinking, which helped cause the emergence of the Third Reich. Let us just think back of the ‘Boomerang Thesis’ in section 2.1.

But we need to be careful to conclude that this re-enactment of the Holocaust in India was what Desai was working towards the whole time, because it was not. In the end, she still doubted between two alternative endings. The other ending would have been Baumgartner’s death at the hands of a beggar living on the pavement in front of his apartment, but she chose to have history catch up with Baumgartner, and to let him die according to the model of Greek tragedy (Verma 258).

Secondly, let us have a look what this small re-enactement of the Holocaust in India, with the young German drug tourist Kurt killing the old German Jew Baumgartner, proves. As Cheyette has pointed out, “Desai shows just how marginal this European history is in a postcolonial context” (70) by staging this re-enactement. To his Indian neighbours present on the murder scène, it is merely a murder of an old foreign loner that provides them with some entertainment.
4 Conclusion

As my analysis of Baumgartner’s Bombay has proven, the novel contains the stories of several exiled, displaced, and debauched characters. Although we only get to know most characters partially in the passages when they meet the main character, Baumgartner, an exiled German Jew, these snippets are enough to make the reader realise that some of these characters’ lives, like the lives of Habibullah, Jahu, and Sushil, are also ruined because of a violent history, but here the violent history of the Partition. It shows how, although the traumatic histories are not to be equated, the suffering caused by them is similar. The establishment of links between the victims prove the entanglement of the traumatic histories of the Holocaust and the Partition, and show that the recognition of the Holocaust is not at the expense of the recognition of the Partition.

The different settings for the novel, like the ravaged city of Calcutta and the British internment camp located in the Himalayas (so on Indian soil), are not secondary to the story, or used as a foil to Europe. The displacement of Hugo to India, where one is also confronted with displaced and dispossessed persons whose lives are blown to bits by history, offer a response to the uniqueness of the Holocaust, by showing how these different histories of violence entangle when put side by side. The excerpt in the internment camp also includes the British into the story, and shows that the regime of the British is not that different from the German regime, because both regimes create exiles; if it is not based on religion, the exclusion is based on nationality.

In Desai’s novel, ignorance is a recurrent motif. The novel contains several passages in which it becomes clear that the characters are ignorant of the other’s history and/or pain, and this brings along incomprehension and problems. Because Desai shows the
consequences of this ignorance, she actually proves to the reader that this ignorance is not the right attitude. It may seem easier to remain ignorant, e.g. to not have to deal with ‘another war’ like Baumgartner, but then a cycle of destruction and restoration seems unavoidable. In a way, the motif of ignorance that reinforces the feeling of a cycle also underscores the need to surpass the supposed uniqueness of the Holocaust, and the urge to elide the Partition, and to work towards a new approach like multidirectional memory, to be able to break through the cycle. With my reading, influenced by Rothberg’s theory of multidirectional memory, I hope to have shown that this kind of reading does more justice to Baumgartner’s Bombay than the readings based on a ‘competitive memory’-model.
Abbreviations

BB = Baumgartner’s Bombay

HoD = Heart of Darkness

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