

BAUMGARTNER'S BOMBAY : CONSTRUCTING IDENTITIES OF LIMINAL TYPE

Anita Desai's ninth novel, *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988) acclaimed as masterpiece, is called an experiment in trilingual writing because in it Anita Desai has employed the language of her infancy and childhood : German, Hindi and English. In addition, the novelist herself has claimed in an interview with Andrew Robinson that her mixed parentage created for her a synthesis which is the base of work. She has seen India, as she says, 'through the eyes of my mother, as an outsider, but my feelings for India are my father's, of someone born here' (*The Saturday Statesman*, Aug 13, 1988). Actually, as she admits, the seeds of the novel had been lying at the back of her mind since the time she was in Bombay. She knew 'an Austrian Jew there who used to walk around in the back streets looking for scraps to feed his cats' (Ibid). He was not as poor as he looked. In fact, he was quite rich. In course of time he died a natural death. A friend of Desai handed Desai a bunch of letters in Germany left by the old man. Anita Desai found nothing unusual in the letters except the stamp number on each of them. The letters bore muted testimony of the Nazi concentration camps. The blank spaces in the letters told a story of their own. And 'because they had been so empty, they teased my mind; I had to supply the missing history to them' (Ibid). Desai has also claimed that the title of the novel came to her mind, while she went for a stroll in her favourite Lodi Gardens in Delhi. 'Like a magic word it brought everything to life again' (Ibid). Her work, as she claims, was made somewhat easier as she went down the memory lane and 'her mother's experience of India from the late 1920s onwards and her memories of pre-war Germany she'd talked a lot about, and the memories of her German friends who'd actually been in internment camps during the war.' (Ibid).

Whatever may be its provenance, the novel, after its appearance in the literary world, has successfully drawn the attentions of different critics. We, therefore, find the critics interpret it from different points of view. Taking into consideration the above data, Suresh C. Saxena has studied it as 'search for roots' (R. K. Dhawan (ed.) Vol-4, 1991 : 114). Usha Bande has explored 'the outsider situation' (Ibid : 123) in it. By 'outsider' Bande refers to those characters who fail to achieve an adjustment with the world, who are homeless and who have a sense of personal inadequacy. Dividing the outsiders into two groups—'insider-outsiders' and 'outsider-outsiders' – she labels the characters of Indian origins as 'insider-outsiders' such as Habibullah, Jagu and the pavement dweller and his family, and the five German characters as 'outsider-outsiders' who have made India their home, although for some reasons they escape the mainstream. As Usha Bande observes, the worst sufferer of these characters is Hugo Baumgartner (Ibid : 122-128) Subhas Chandra, on the other hand, has tried to show that Hugo's predicament is akin to that of Sisyphus (Ibid : 131). Again, S. Indira considers it as 'a powerful and poignant study in human loneliness' (S. Indira, 1994 : 170). An American critic, Judie Newman, in her illuminating essay entitled, *History and Letters : Baumgartner's Bombay*, has suggested ways of reading literature as a more subtle form of history. In her view, 'the plot seems to employ that history is only a meaningless series of re-enactments, a story which repeats itself'. Adapting Rushdie's dictum, she says : 'Europe repeats itself in India, as farce' (Michael Parker & Roger Starkey (eds.) 1995 : 196). Lastly, she argues that Mutti's letters reveal both the insufficiency of literature in the face of history –and its full necessity' (Ibid : 207). Strongly marked by repetition, as Judie Newman's essay points out, Michael Parker and Roger Starkey observe that '*Baumgartner's Bombay* is a novel about recurring cycles of violence and dispossession, of global war, the colonial war ... religious war. Endless war' (Ibid:16). Again, an Indian critic like Malashri Lal has given it a feminist-deconstructive reading (K. Jain (ed.) 1998 : 193-207). Mrs. Lal has tried to show that though the novel, in its obvious form, is male-centred, yet by giving us a constantly retiring, retreating almost vanishing hero, Desai dethrones the apparent male-centre and turns the readers' attention to the women characters placed at the periphery. Mrs. Lal has also argued that the novelist's feminist position in this novel is both radical and subtle—'radical because of the obliteration of the male centre, and subtle because

the void at the centre is almost replaced by the female experience of India but not quite' (Ibid : 197). All these readings of the novel are valid in their own ways.

However, the exploration of the novel has not yet been exhausted. It can also be read from a Foucauldian feminist perspective in order to resurrect the subjugated experiences of two German expatriates – Hugo Baumgartner and Lotte—in India during world war II and pre-partition phase of India's independence movement as well as post-independence period. Of these two characters, the male one is constructed as an effeminate man and the female one as an assertive woman. These two characters, in this sense, are of liminal type. In constructing these two characters, Desai seeks to challenge the stability and coherence of hegemonic gender norms and prefigure another form of gender identity, that is, unsexed body of a male and the sexed body of a female. The latter has been strategically appropriated to create resistance to the oppressive capitalist power and to enjoy power and pleasure in patriarchal capitalist society, while the former, the unsexed body of a male, to create a form of resistance to human relationship based upon self-aggrandisement and violence in patriarchal capitalist world.

The novel consists of seven chapters, narrating alternately the past and present lives of the German expatriates and their relationships with other characters in multi-dimensional capitalist society. Here it is relevant to note that Desai, from a transnational feminist position, shows deep compassion upon the expatriates, but when the question of empowerment crops up, she takes sides with the German female character, Lotte, whom she empowers to narrate not only the story of her own life but also that of Hugo's life. In narrating the tales of their lives Lotte enters into the struggle over meanings on the margins. As a narrator, she shows her capacity to unite the structure of the novel.

Baumgartner, as a Jew, is doubly exiled both in Europe and in India. This emphasises his confusing self-identify, his inability to find 'the shelter which was once there but is there no longer'. He is accepting but not accepted in India. But only in death he finds shelter in India and his search for identity gets a meaning to his meaningless life. But his identity can in no way be situated at any fixed boundary, although Mrs. Lal observes that Baumgartner has 'racist preferences' (N.K. Jain (ed.) 1998:200). In her view, 'indefinite

German origins in Lotte and the drugged German youth evoke empathy in a man who has spent years ignoring the poor Indians crowded in a rooming house, and even the poorer Indians outside his window' (Ibid : 200). It is true that Baumgartner cajoles the rude and drugged German youth in German, takes him home and mothers him. But it is not because of his racist preference towards him, but because of the fact that 'the boy was no different from a sick cat' (142). And it is also true that it is only Lotte who keeps him in touch with the German tongue—'but that was not why he went to her. He saw Lotte not because she was from Germany but because she belonged to the India of his own experience' (150). So Baumgartner's identity cannot be said to be inflected by racial element. If this be so, he would have opposed Farrokh's invectives against western culture and western people. Farrokh views 'the young western heathens as spoiling Indian culture. But Baumgartner had no intention of standing up for the white man's reputation here in Farrokh's cafe while he had his morning tea and his cats got their food' (16). The main concern of his life is to look after the cats and enjoy a pleasure through a relationship with the kittens which greet him exuberantly even if he grows shabbier. Thus towards the end Baumgartner emerges as 'a Billiwallah pagal, the Madman of the cats' (10), although unfortunately he is murdered by the German youth for money. Through the formation of this identity, Baumgartner is made to transgress the boundary between human and animal. This relatedness is not by blood but by choice which may be construed as an oppositional consciousness against the social identities based on the categories of sex, race or class.

However, as an obverse to Baumgartner, Lotte, a cabaret dancer, experiences India more richly. She strikes the floor with her heels, swing her hips and gestures with her hands and sings together with Gissy :

Lola and Lily

Are fifteen and free

Lola and Lily

O give them to me (96).

The novelist here gives clear contrasts to the India of Lotte and Baumgartner. During war years Baumgartner goes to an internment camp and because of his bleating before the officer he cannot convince the latter of the fact that he is not a Nazi, but a German Jew and

therefore a refugee. Besides, in the internment camp he behaves 'like a mournful turtle' (109). But the resourceful Lotte appropriates the agency of marriage for escaping detention. She strikes a bargain marriage with Kanti Sethia, a Bengali jeweller, and changes her nationality. Here it would not be an exaggeration to take note of Foucault's observation on sexuality which, according to him, is disobedient to power (*History of Sexuality* vol.I trans 1990 : 103). In his view, sexuality is a dense transfer point of relations of power. He does not consider sexuality as something naturally given which power tries to hold in check, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power (Ibid : 106). Foucault also posits that in every society there are two systems of sexuality : deployment of alliance and deployment of sexuality. The deployment of alliance is built around a system of rules defining the permitted and the forbidden, the illicit and the licit, whereas the deployment of sexuality operates according to mobile, polymorphous, and the contingent techniques of power. The deployment of alliance has one of its chief objectives to reproduce the interplay of relations and maintain the law that governs them; the deployment of sexuality, on the other hand, engenders a continual extension of areas and forms of control. The first links between partners and definite statutes, the second is concerned with the sensations of the body, the quality of pleasures and the nature of impressions, however tenuous or imperceptible. Lastly, the deployment of alliance is attuned to a homeostasis of the social body—important phase of which is reproduction and the deployment of sexuality has its reason for being, not in reproducing itself, but in proliferating, innovating, annexing, creating and penetrating bodies, in an increasingly detailed way and in controlling population in an increasingly comprehensive way (Ibid : 107). In the ultimate analysis, Foucault shows that the deployment of sexuality has neither obliterated the deployment of alliance nor rendered it useless. Adapting Foucault's observation on sexuality, it may be said that, through the relationship between Kanti Sethia and Lotte, Anita Desai extends sexuality from the periphery of deployment of alliance to the deployment of sexuality. Kanti Sethia has used the Hindu marriage norms in a fake manner in order to enter into the domain of deployment of sexuality for a better quality of sexual pleasure and bodily sensation. This is why after

the fake marriage he shifts Lotte from Calcutta to Bombay. Lotte, on the other hand, using the power of her sexy body, ensnares Kanti to make herself memsahib and to escape imprisonment in the British Camp. In relating her sex to that of Kanti, she gets the status of a memsahib and a fine flat and a shop for making hats. But in accordance with the norms of the deployment of alliance, Kanti should be as much careful towards her as she should be loyal to him in respect of sexuality. But Lotte disobeys the power of Kanti in his absence by offering her sexed body to Baumgartner's unsexed body. As Baumgartner falls into a troubled sleep in her bed, she comforts his old body with the warmth and sensations of her own. Though she is a woman, she takes the initiative of offering him the opiate of sexual oblivion :

Eventually he felt something press against his back. He thought with sleeping affection that it was his cats who had come to lie on his chest or beside his pillow, and purr. He put out his arm to enfold Fretzi and Mimi, Miese and Lulu. Instead of their stifling, adhesive fur, he met only Lotte's hairless smoothness and bareness. The human, womanly quality of her slack old skin, soft as flour, drew a groan of pleasure out of his empty stomach – it was good, like bread (82).

However, after Kanti's death, Lotte tries to assert herself as Kanti's wife for his property, and gets involved in court cases with Kanti's sons. But because of her neighbours' siding with his sons she has to negotiate with them. She leaves the fine flat for a lot of money :

Then they sided with his sons, then they too said I was not married, could not keep the flat. So what could I do, Hugo, but give up my beautiful flat in Napoli? They offered to settle out of court—quite a lot of money it seemed to me—so I took it. After all I had this place, it used to be my shop, my little factory (75).

But Baumgartner is seen never to assert his position. After Chimanlal's death, he wanted his share of the business and the race-horse that both he and Chimanlal purchased out of the winning money from races. But as Chimanlal's son forcefully drove him out of the shop, he was seen not to utter a single word of protest. He was seen to behave like an effeminate

man. He went back to his kittens. But Lotte asserts her position everywhere. She is again seen to assert herself beside the deadbody of Baumgartner—she does not first of all allow the police officer or Chimanlal's son and the landlord to touch his belongings. She vociferously asserts : 'Everything is his, no one can touch it' (229). Chimanlal's son who drove Baumgartner out of his business is forced to speak levelly, keeping his tone sensible : 'No, madam, sorry, it has become police property because it is a police case. This murder' (229). However, understanding the situation, Lotte leaves the scene with deep despair and feels an urge to meet Hugo in death. We hear her mutter : 'yes, yes, I go now, I go too' (230). Thus in allowing Lotte to construct the narratives of Baumgartner's and her own oppressed life, Anita Desai empowers her to enter into struggle over interpretations of life in the patriarchal capitalist society.