

# *Whose Bombay is it Anyway?: Anita Desai's "Baumgartner's Bombay"*

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The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.

EDWARD SAID, *Orientalism*

THE AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGIST Clifford Geertz has long been associated with a shift in the discipline of anthropology that stresses its own arbitrary nature and argues instead for a more modest approach, seeking "what generality it can by orchestrating contrasts rather than isolating regularities or abstracting types" (*Local Knowledge* 13). In a particularly felicitous turn of phrase, Geertz elsewhere writes of the anthropologist's job being akin to "strain[ing] to read over the shoulder of those to whom they properly belong . . . [the] ensemble of texts" which constitute their cultural self (*Interpretations* 452-53). This is a description of the anthropologist's craft which at once evokes a sense of childish innocence and a potentially less benign tendency to stick one's beak where it is not wanted. In stark contrast with that other, more conventional civilizing quest for the erasure of alterity, Geertz's view of anthropology speaks then of a rather civilized search for the Other. His metaphor seems to suggest that *this* kind of anthropologist *always* refrains from running away with the Other's texts.

In an essay entitled "Being There?: Literary Criticism, Localism and Local Knowledge," David Simpson provides a valuable critique of Geertz's stance, focusing on his views of this new, humbler, streak of anthropological scholarship. Noting that "anthropology is among the most ethically fraught of all disciplines"

(13), Simpson goes on to note that today's anthropologists are wary of the "real consequences"—presumably to others but possibly also to themselves—of the sort of work they do. In contrast, he asserts, no "literary critic need worry overmuch about the results of his or her bad writing, since the text remains potentially a blank space for new readings once the necessary demystifications are achieved" (13). I am not sure that I agree with Simpson here. For whatever "real consequences" any "Other" cultures and peoples have been exposed to over a period of centuries, they have, more likely than not, been the result of a capitalist need for markets, rather than of any immediate anthropological *faux pas*. That is not to say, however, that anthropology and its practitioners on occasion have not been directly involved in the translation of the Other into a capitalist commodity, albeit unintentionally. Furthermore, *literary* critics such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Gauri Viswanathan, to name but a few, have themselves spent considerable amounts of time and energy seeking to demonstrate precisely the level of noxious involvement of *literature* in the process of colonization. Finally, I am not sure that agreement on the ways in which the "necessary demystifications [may be] achieved," or indeed what they may actually be, would be easy to reach.

It is not the purpose of this essay, however, to take issue with either Geertz or Simpson. Rather, I am interested in the implications raised by their comments in relation to the literary practices of fictional writers. In particular—and with the work of critics such as Said, Viswanathan, and Spivak, among others, in mind—I am concerned with their usefulness for reading postcolonial works of fiction. At the risk of stretching Geertz's analogy a bit thinly, I argue in my reading of *Baumgartner's Bombay* that the postcolonial writer at times not only looks over the shoulder of the colonized subjects of his or her novel but, finding the strain of the acrobatics perhaps too exacting, simply opts for taking the texts right from under their noses. Why bother to listen when you can simply make it up, "fiction" it? This essay contends therefore that the "ensemble of texts" of Indian culture Desai offers in *Baumgartner's Bombay* is one in which India, both as a body of texts (that is, as a culture), and as a textual body (the feminized Orient), is re-written, but then simultaneously written over.

## I

*Baumgartner's Bombay* tells the story of Hugo Baumgartner, a Jewish refugee who leaves Berlin just as Adolf Hitler comes to power and is now living in exile, in India. As such, the novel contains the "ensemble of texts" that comprise his life, past and present, and offers a perceptive study of the sense of alienation, despair, and utter fragmentation that are endemic to the conditions of displacement and exile. These are clearly themes common to Desai's work, as readers of her novels will recognize. "An avowedly subjective writer," in the words of Harveen Sachdeva Mann (76), Desai herself might have said of the novel that it deals simply with "the elements that remain basic to our lives. I mean the human condition itself" (Interview, Dalmia 13). She returns repeatedly to such concerns both in all her novels and in numerous interviews. In her conversation with Yashodhara Dalmia, Desai again remarked that to her "only the individual, the solitary being, is of interest" (Interview 13). Indeed, speaking more recently with Jussawalla, Desai accepted the interviewer's assertion that she "'mothered' the psychological novel in India" (Interview 173).

Given the novel's thematic focus, its (Modernist) ancestry and particularly Desai's own philosophical preoccupations, *Baumgartner's Bombay* can therefore be read as quintessentially "universal" in its analysis of Baumgartner's quest for his "solitary being." Echoes of Virginia Woolf's work abound; and E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* is never far off from the work's ambience. Within this context the emphasis on India's chaos and disorder can be seen as objective correlatives for the despair and hopelessness in Baumgartner's life. Moreover, and like Nirode in *Voices in the City*, Baumgartner is yet another of Desai's weak and troubled male characters, revealing the feminist edge to her work, which Mann explores. Consequently, the fact that Baumgartner lives in Bombay would seem if not totally irrelevant at least secondary to the story. Bombay and India are *simply* the setting of Baumgartner's existential crisis. There is a sense, however, in which it is precisely through the use of this setting that the novel becomes problematic. In what follows I will focus on Desai's use of an Indian background in *Baumgartner's Bombay*, a

novel of which the author herself somewhat revealingly has said that its 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” (169). She adds: “It seems such eccentric material when you consider the Indian background” (174).

## II

Desai’s use of India as a setting for the novel appears at the outset a logical one. Although she now divides her time between India and the US, she was born in India, and her work reflects an “Indian subjectivity.” In Geertz’s terminology, she is therefore particularly well qualified: she possesses “local knowledge.” Ironically, it is perhaps a reflection of the author’s own cultural “in-betweenness” that the novel is simultaneously “thick” with cosmopolitanism.<sup>1</sup> It is a “novel of the world,” so to speak. For one, it is narrated in a number of languages. Foreign words are *Baumgartner’s Bombay’s* most pungent quality, an over abundance of words, a wealth of Other languages—English, German, French, Portuguese, Bengali, Hindi, Hebrew—words that “talk” of Baumgartner’s life, that tell of his *naïveté*, of his fragility. Sara Suleri’s assertion that “the ghosts of writers like Kipling and Forster still haunt the contemporary Indian novel in English” (178) seems here to be a rather apt commentary. For while the novel does not necessarily presume a readership fluent in *all* the various languages used, it would seem to appeal to that readership’s *sophisticated cosmopolitanism* in order not to feel threatened by its inability to follow all that is being said. One of the ironies of life in the latter part of the twentieth century is that the status of languages such as English or French is constantly eroded by the “return home” of thousands of would-be *assimilés*. Thus even those to whom these languages traditionally “belonged” now use them without conscious realization of the effects of this “colonization in reverse.”<sup>2</sup> For the readership Desai has in mind is one obviously familiar with the Indian *curry* houses at Harrow on the Hill, the Chinese *dim sum* outlets in the Chinatowns of this world. It is, in sum, an audience to whom the Quebecois’s screams of horror and despair in the face of the threat posed to their culture

by outside influences would sound rather emotional in these days of "globalization."

The paradox, however, in *Baumgartner's Bombay* is that in stark contrast with the sparing use of Hindi or Bengali, the German language is used to convey moments of extreme significance in the main character's childhood, identifying it thus as a language deeply endowed with the emotional strength capable of denoting the richness of the "human condition" in all its nuances. And this is the point I want to stress in Desai's linguistic melting pot—the privileging of certain languages over others. German is, in other words, a language of *reason*, a language of *civilization*.<sup>3</sup> For it is significant that while the German *stanzas* often take up large sections of consecutive pages in the novel, Indian languages such as Bengali and Hindi are sprinkled much more sparingly throughout the work, rather like a spice too strong for the frail stomach of a Eurocentric readership. "Why," as Frau Baumgartner points out to her son, "should your mother read a *Bengalische* poet when I can read the beautiful verses of my dear friend Friedmans?" (56). This is not an entirely rhetorical question. After all, as recently as 1988, Saul Bellow, the American author, could comment in a report in *The New York Times*: "Who is the Tolstoy of the Zulus? The Proust of the Papuans? I'd be glad to read them" (26). As Mrs. Baumgartner's comments imply—and Bellow's underline—whatever the works of any *Bengalische* poets might be, they can hardly be expected to equal those of her "own dear Friedmans," the unknown poet—whose work is by no means equal to Bellow's idols.

Clearly a certain mockery underlies the above passage. In fact the use of an ironic viewpoint is a constant in Desai's work. Yet it is arguable that English too occupies a privileged position in the narrative. It is much more than just the *medium* through which Baumgartner's story is told. It 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. For as Simpson noted in his essay, "thick description presumes thin description" (11). In other words, despite the wealth of detail, the overall picture remains still rather sketchy. In *Baumgartner's Bombay*, English is a

language which echoes uncannily the horror of that other “real” Africa of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Once those Conradian boxfuls of allusions are unpacked, once the adjectival rhizome that so thickly underpins the narrative is unstitched, there is really very little about Africa or about Africans. Conrad too was concerned with the “solitary being.” In this way, Desai’s novel presupposes a shared intellectual background, a common cultural heritage in which the self is at home anywhere, but a self which at the outset renounces the allegiances imposed by nationalist demands. While it is wise to be aware of the multilayered ironies of a novel that “remains Indian” and that as such might be said to want to engage in a “writing back” to the Orientalist discourse of colonial texts, the sense of detachment through which these levels of subversion are articulated appears much too effective—unwittingly if not overtly condescending. The narrative *appears* in effect to legitimize a discourse of complete negation in which India is not modern, not developed, not civilized, not Western.<sup>4</sup> Thus “poor” Baumgartner escapes the Nazis is buffeted by the dreary nature of the “human condition” and survives only to confront the dangers of a faceless but undeniable *dentata*, India. It is indeed the contrast between the portrait of Baumgartner’s gentleness and humility in the face of the inhuman environment in which he lives that seals most convincingly the cruel and unsympathetic picture of India and its people. What is proposed in *Baumgartner’s Bombay* is a Manichean dichotomy that relates Baumgartner’s survival to being able to remain continually alert to the mischievous and dangerous ways of the Other. His relationship with India is one in which he needs not only to identify the Other but also to ensure that he himself remains an Other. The point is not that he should have survived the adversities inherent in his human condition at all, but that he should have done so in India of all places. That Conrad’s Kurtz should have survived all those years does not at all surprise—indeed men were made of sterner matter in those days. And that he should have done so in darkest, ‘inscrutable’ Africa, amongst those “streams of [half-naked] human beings” (*Heart* 99), however, speaks volumes on the courage of the white man.

The fact that the narrative is largely presented through Baumgartner's viewpoint thus becomes the central point of contention. For the subversion of colonial discourses of "othering" implied by the emphasis on an anthropological language is ultimately undermined by his unstable place in the narrative. The language, the metaphors, and the tone of the novel remain those of an outsider's discourse. That Baumgartner himself already appears to be too much a product of India to be still bothered by those factors that are *intrinsic* to the narrative's portrait of his discomfort—the heat, the flies, the poverty—compounds the inconsistencies. Indeed, Baumgartner's suitability to be (in) India is underscored by the fact that even his stomach remained indifferent to the proverbial terror of the European subject in the Orient: dysentery and diarrhoea. As Lotte exclaims in amazement, "What, on your very first day you ate curry? And you did not get food poisoning? Dysentery? Not even diarrhoea?" (88). If irony is to be read in the lampooning of the "civilized" Western subject's fears of the dangerous sites of "Otherness," it is clearly preempted by Lotte's quasi-tragicomic role in the narrative.

Perhaps a more successful attempt at ridiculing the white subject's portrait of India is captured in the following passage:

Was it not India's way of revealing the world that lay on the other side of the mirror? India flashed the mirror in your face, with a brightness and laughter as raucous as a street band. You could be blinded by it. But if you refused to look into it, if you insisted on walking around the back, then India stood aside, admitting you where you had not thought you could go. India was two words, or ten. She stood before him, hands on her hips, laughing that blood-stained laugh: Choose! Choose! (85-86)

This personification of India as a "bewitching," seductive sorceress, itself now a major character in the novel, is reminiscent of "[t]he Orient [as] a living tableau of queerness" (Said 103), a symbiosis of mystery, danger, and bestiality. In this way, the novel addresses the archives of colonialism, for while India is still female, and willing to cooperate (an Asian *La Malinche*?)<sup>5</sup> it is now much more clearly in control. Yet while the ironic emphasis on the colonial discourse of demonization revealed in the passage is fairly obvious, it is also undermined by the fact that it is

voiced through Baumgartner's skewed view of the world as a whole. For Baumgartner, it is worth recalling, is depicted largely as a man-child, his flawed perspective pathetically peripatetic. Paradoxically, therefore, while the linguistic playfulness, the allusion to mirror images of India and self, and India as *Other than* yet equal to self, appropriate and abrogate a colonialist view of India as sly and untrustworthy, they also underscore a reading of the novel as subscribing to a Eurocentric psychoanalytical framework.

*Baumgartner's Bombay* is a novel that speaks primarily of the demise of an old, ordered world—that of pre-1939 Europe—and of the consequences of such an event. It is in this context that the existentialist nature of its message ultimately problematizes the issue of its Indian setting. For the narrative endorses a discourse that confirms, in spite of its playful attempts to satirize it, the view that the white man/woman can enter India (as a sign of the Orient) only at the expense of his or her fall into chaos. Baumgartner's and Lotte's descent into the hellish worlds of Bombay and Calcutta illustrates the point: "[w]hen he overcame and left behind his initial bewilderment at lives so primitive, so basic and unchanging, [Baumgartner] began to envy them that simplicity, the absence of choice and history" (111). Despite the derisive tone implicit in the allusion to "the absence of choice and history," India signifies *still* an inescapable pitfall, as Baumgartner suggests when he comments: "Where could we go, Lotte? Where could you and I have gone?" (80). Europe and Europeans are discursively portrayed within a dichotomy that identifies them either as heroes or victims, depending on whether they succeed in their *mission civilisatrice* or are absorbed into the destructive *vortex* which Asia, or Africa, or South America, constitute.

When, in spite of his daily encounters with the locals, Baumgartner is depicted as believing still that the "natives" are "cruel and [with] a malevolent look" (19), there is a sense of ironic overkill. That the colonizer's relationship with the colonized might be echoed in Baumgartner's own case, does not, *per se*, explain the appropriation of the narrative device. That Baumgartner himself has long become a symbol of impotence,



physical and psychological, does not seem to explain the Indian women's indifference: the "women themselves never gave away their consciousness of his presence by so much as a glance or a giggle" (110). Within the context of what appears to be a narrative tension between the act of "writing back" and the search for the "solitary being" that so interests Desai, it is possible moreover to read the cats which Baumgartner brings home from time to time as metonymic of the trap in which he finds himself in India. They are emblematic of a *raw* India, their chthonic nature suggesting that India and its subjects remain still (perhaps irremediably?) too deeply inscribed with animality. Indeed, as Baumgartner feeds the cats each night, there is always a suggestion of imminent danger, the sense that they may turn against him (he is once actually bitten). Forming a menacing circle around his legs, they demand in their incomprehensible babble their own share in life—the scraps of food Baumgartner procures from local cafés and food stalls.

The scene is especially significant for the way in which it parallels Baumgartner's own encounters with his Indian neighbours. As he walks in and out of his squalid apartment, Baumgartner moves carefully through a maze of mendicants, and others, fearful that they, too, may pounce on him (7, 145, 204). As Indians, they remain also out of his reach, since after 50 years in India he has learnt little more than a smattering of words: "*chai, khana, baraf, lao, jaldi, joota, chota peg, pani, kamra, soda, garee*" (92).

[Baumgartner] had to look down and watch his feet as he picked his way past the family that lived in front of Hira Niwas. They worked constantly at reinforcing the shelter they had built here, flattening packing cases for walls and tin cans for roof, attaching rags to the railings around Hira Niwas and stretching them onto their rooftop; . . . He had to avoid the gnarled and rotting feet of the man who always lay in a drunken stupor at this time of the morning, his head inside the shelter and his legs outside, like pieces of wood flung down, as well as the pile of cooking pots that the women washed in the gutter so that they shone like crumpled tinfoil in the glare, and the heaps of faeces that the children left along the same gutter, and the squares of greasy paper from which they had eaten their food the night before. It was a familiar sight to Baumgartner, as he was to them, with his plastic bag in his hands and his shoes slit at the

sides for comfort, but they still had to watch each other, to be vigilant. (6-7)

This is a truly pre-Geertzian portrait, articulated in an anthropological language still miles away from its later *angst*-ridden phase, totalitarian and totalizing. Immersed with the natives, the real subjects of analysis, the scientist got by speaking odd bits of their language, friendly yet always wary of the “innate” ability of the savage to resort to its chthonic state. Thus,

Baumgartner knew that family as well as a devout Christian is familiar with the Holy Family in the cattle stall . . . but he never walked past them, never turned his back without feeling the hairs on the back of his neck rise, a brief prickle of—not fear, but unease, an apprehension. (7)

It is a fear that he experiences repeatedly: “As always, he felt his hair stand on the back of his neck, and sweat break out as he passed them” (144). The narrative of classist constructs is now interwoven with, and underscored by, a Darwinian one. It implies a distinction between the *civilizable* savage (the native middle-classes) and the “noble” savage, those whose state of utter abjection places them beyond the reach of the white man’s benevolent influence. How else to explain the fact that the only Indians whom Baumgartner perceives as a threat are 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? Thus, although living among the poor for nearly 50 years without ever escaping his condition of outsider, Baumgartner soon finds in Chimanlal, the middle-class businessman, a good-natured companion with whom to share on an equal footing their mutual “human condition.”

The point is emphasized when we juxtapose the world in which Baumgartner only just survives with the account of the life the Jewish prisoners endure in the camp in which they were detained in India. There, despite the adversities he faces, both physically and psychologically, the white man, albeit in the more complex figure of the marginalized Jew, proves why he is different. The difference is reflected in the genteel—and gentle—nature of the prisoners’ pastimes—reading, “studying Sanskrit,

Arabic, astronomy and even homeopathy" (125), games, philosophical and political discussions, concertos at which the music of Bach and Beethoven is performed (134)—suggesting the mild but clearly undeniable nature of their character, their ability to remain human in the most inhumane conditions. While Baumgartner's Indian counterpart passes his days sitting up against the walls of the frail and decrepit contraptions he calls home (6), unable to fight back, the white man simply refuses to lie down. Even within the abhorrent confines of an internment camp he reveals the essence of *his civilization*—a genuine and unstoppable desire for knowledge, progress, and development. It is not a portrait of meekness and abjection we are offered, rather one of civilized defiance and resilience. Instinct, it is obvious, has long been tamed by the European. As David Spurr notes, in his comments on the racial assumptions epitomized by de Gobineau's "Essai sur l'Inégalité des Races Humaines" (1854):

Superior to the black and yellow, the white race is characterised by energetic intelligence, perseverance, physical strength, an instinct for order, and a pronounced taste for liberty which despises, on the one hand, "the rigid social forms under which the Chinese willingly sleep, as well as the severe despotism which alone can retain the blacks." (65)

Indeed Spurr's work provides a useful frame through which to read *Baumgartner's Bombay*. As he notes earlier: "[u]nder Western eyes, the body is that which is most proper to the primitive, the sign by which the primitive is represented. The body, rather than their speech, law, or history, is the essential defining characteristic of primitive peoples" (22). For the Indians in *Baumgartner's Bombay* too are identified largely by their "naked skin, oiled and slithering with perspiration, the piscine bulge and stare of so many eyes" (18), and India as "damply, odorously, cacophonously palpable" (214).

Occasionally the satire of a Western gaze is somewhat more successful, as when the narrator notes: "It was this matter of feeding the cows, collecting their dung, turning it into fuel, and using it to cook their meals that seemed to rule their lives—at least the part that Baumgartner watched with such bewilderment

and fascination" (111). For the passage highlights the Western obsessive attention to that which is odd, in sum, *different*, in the Other's ways. Later, the German drug addict Kurt too is used to identify and subvert the totalizing tendency of ethnographic disciplines. His focus is not only on the exotic but on the bizarre, the macabre, the reductive *strangeness* the tourist carries back home. This is stressed through the telegraphic manner in which the young hippie retells his stay in India: "'Sick in Goa?' the boy spat at him. 'Yes, sick in Goa. Sick in Benares. Sick in Katmandu. Sick in Sarnath, sick, sick everywhere.'" (156). Kurt speaks here through the voice of the spoilt Western tourist, adventurer, or researcher who willingly risks his or her life in order to get *to know* the Other—cultures, peoples, civilizations. "In Benares he had lived with the doms in the burning ghat"; in "Katmandu's dust was mingled his blood" (157); and in "Calcutta he had lived with the lepers" (158).

In Tibet, in Lhasa, he saw the sight no man was meant to see. The corpses laid on the rocks under the sky, being cut into quarters with knives, into quarters and then into fragments, and the bones hammered until they were dust. (158)

The use of a language of conquest so familiar to the colonial discourses of physical and textual dispossession can be seen as a subversion of the trope of the indefatigable European in search of Otherness. In his (re)naming of the experiences he endures, the young hippie (re)claims them as his own—they are no longer those of an Other outside of his self, rather he is now the Other to the Other's alienated self. But Kurt—the name itself echoes Conrad's Kurtz—is not a credible figure. Whatever potential for subversion this picture of India through the eyes of a Westerner might have offered, it is itself thwarted by the fact that the narrator is so hopelessly demented. It fails when it is revealed that he was throughout his journeys in a drug-induced state of hallucination: in Goa "he had bought and sold and lived on opium, on marijuana, on cannabis, on heroin" (158), and he expects that in Delhi, Lucknow, Mathura, and Rajasthan there will be drugs and religion. By preempting 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.

*Baumgartner's Bombay* culminates with the death of Baumgartner at the hands of Kurt. The symbolism is, if anything, transparent. It would seem inevitable that Baumgartner, a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany, should be murdered by a modern-day heir to Adolf Hitler's poisonous legacy. The manner of his death, however, and particularly the carnivalesque quality of the scenes that ensue, are less straightforwardly obvious. For the fact that Baumgartner, a German Jew, should now be killed by (an) Other German is consistent with the novel's larger, "universal" tone. However, Kurt's credibility had long been destroyed by his drug addiction. Indeed, the man whom Kurt kills is not the *real* Baumgartner, the gentle and civilized European subject who once sought refuge in India. He had long been devoured by an India whose identity Orientalism has always inscribed in terms of inscrutability and threat.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, *Baumgartner's Bombay* is about India but not of India, Indian and *other than Indian*. For its account of Baumgartner's existential crisis is only made possible by an appropriation of an anthropological discourse in which India and Indians are the stage and actors for Baumgartner's show. As Sawid Ahmad Khan may have put it, "What can they [the future generations] think, after perusing this book and looking at its pictures, of the power and the honour of the natives of India?" (qtd. in Suleri 23). For although set in India, the novel ultimately silences the polysemic nature of Indian society, the multifaceted reality of its being by the imposition of a monologic narrative frame in which civilization equals development and progress. Whose Bombay is it, anyway? I doubt whether the Bombay depicted in *Baumgartner's Bombay* really belongs to Hugo Baumgartner rather than to the Indians we see in the background.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Desai describes *Baumgartner's Bombay* as a book which evolved from her journeys abroad; she notes that the novel was written during her one-year stay in Cambridge (Interview, Jussawala 177-78).
- <sup>2</sup> "Colonisation in Reverse" is the title of a poem by the Jamaican poet Louise Bennett; it explores precisely the subversive power of the "return home" of thousands of Caribbean people in the 1950s and 1960s.

- 3 Talking with Feroza Jussawalla, Desai explained the novel thus: "For years, I had wanted to write a book about the German part of my background and to put to use the German language which was a part of my childhood [but] I had no idea how to do it. . . . It seems such eccentric material when you consider the Indian background." She goes on to reveal how she came by "a packet of letters in German" that had belonged to an old German, whom she herself "used to see shuffling around [Bombay] and feeding cats the way I have described" (174).
- 4 Interestingly, Desai herself has remarked in her interview with Dalmia that contemporary India is a much less tolerant society than her older (colonial?) self.
- 5 La Malinche was the Amerindian woman who served Columbus as an interpreter; she remains a symbol of submission to European (and American) values (cf. Todorov 1984).
- 6 Desai has commented that she wrote two different endings for the novel. In the alternative version, Baumgartner is killed by the beggar who lives outside the door of his apartment building. Desai notes, "The reason for his sadness through the book is this death that he escaped [by fleeing Nazi Germany] . . . I had to have it catch up with him in the end, and it seemed right and justified in the Greek sense if that death would be the death by a Nazi, by a German" (Interview, Jussawalla 176). Curiously, in response to Jussawalla's comment, "I didn't pick up on the aspect of that German hippie travelling through India with his dirty feet, etc. being a Nazi. I thought of him just as being representative of the Germans," Desai replied, "He is simply a German. He probably doesn't see himself as a Nazi, he's too young to have been a Nazi" (176). To Desai, all Germans seem interchangeable with German Nazis; so although Kurt did not "see himself as a Nazi, he's too young to have been a Nazi," he can still be used as if he were one. Does fiction *ever* matter? Salman Rushdie, for one, might want to reply in the affirmative.

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