

BRAUMGARTNER'S BOMBAY

Anita Desai

(1988)

Story

Desai's tenth novel is possibly her best and certainly her most affecting. It opens with a shocking scene of Hugo Baumgartner's murder in late 1980s Bombay but quickly shifts back in time and is told through a number of flashbacks, including 1930s Berlin and Venice, and 1940s Calcutta and Bombay. Through these earlier scenes, we learn about Hugo's personal and family history. His father ran a successful furniture in Berlin but suffered when Hitler began to introduce anti-Jewish legislation. Although his father was taken to Dachau concentration camp, he was released but later committed suicide. Hugo's mother decided to stay in Germany, but Hugo fled with the help of his father's business partner. Hugo lands up first in Venice, then Bombay and finally Calcutta. In Calcutta he started working for a timber export company but is locked up as an 'enemy alien' since India (as part of the British Empire) was at war with Germany. After six long years in detention, Hugo made his way back to Bombay, where he gets help from Chimanlal, an Indian businessman who was known to his father's business partner.

In the present, Hugo lives in a squalid flat behind the Taj, a famous luxury hotel on the Bombay seafront. Impoverished and aging, he looks after stray cats for whom he collects food scraps from cafés and restaurants in this affluent centre of the city. For this, he is known locally as 'the madman of the cats.' He is friendly with everyone and makes good friends, principally with Lotte and Chimanlal. Lotte is another German who fled the Nazis and who becomes his lover for a brief time. Chimanlal supports Hugo financially and looks after him. The two men invest in a racehorse, which wins many races and earns Hugo a row of expensive-looking trophies that decorate his seedy flat. Soon, however, Chimanlal dies and his son cuts Hugo off from the family, leaving him without any means of financial support. The sad story ends when a German hippie-traveller kills Hugo, who had befriended him, while stealing his racing horse trophies in order to fund his drug addiction.

Themes

Displacement The dominant theme of his affecting novel is displacement, the forced exile (or other kind of movement) from one place, typically one's home, to another, less welcoming place. Hugo is exiled from his German family, his mother and father, whom he never sees again. He is distanced from his German language, in which his parents whispered endearments to him as a child. He learns to hate this language of child-love when he is stuck with Nazi prisoners in an internment camp in India during the war. Even when Hugo is released after the war, he is again forced to flee, this time from the Muslim-Hindu riots in Calcutta. Even in Bombay, his final resting place, he is regarded as a foreigner. Desai describes his alienation this way: 'People's faces sneered at him, saying "firanghi" [foreigner], however good-naturedly, however lacking in malice. Still, the word, the name struck coldly and he winced, hunching his shoulders and trying to avoid the contact he knew they hated because contact contaminated. 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.' Hugo is not the only homeless character. There is also Lotte, another German exile, who is desperately lonely. And there are the stray cats that Hugo cares for and gives a home to. Of the many ironies in this novel, the chief one is its title: Baumgartner's Bombay. That city does not belong to the exiled German. He has no place of his own.

Language Desai uses language both to illustrate the loss of the displaced exile and to underline the cultural complexity of the place where Baumgartner has ended up. As Hugo shuffles along the seafront and sits for a free coffee in the down-at-heel Café de Paris he hears a motley of languages:

Hindi, Marathi, Urdu, Konkani, Tamil, English, Arabic and Gujarati, as well as a sprinkling of European and Far Eastern tongues. His neighbours and acquaintances speak a diversity of languages but he is unable to greet them in their native tongue, an illustration of his linguistic displacement. Instead, he opts for a mumbled and inadequate 'Good morning, salaam.' He is also cut off from his childhood German, the language in which he was loved and laughed. It is the language in which his mother has written him postcards, filling the small space with phrases like 'my little sweet', 'my pumpkin' and other endearments. Lotte, the other German exile in Bombay, has learned to hate her native language, because of its association with Nazism and war and cruelty. She cannot even read the endearments in Hugo's mother's postcards without crying, 'Nein, nein,' because the tenderness of the words has been nullified by the horrors of reality. The importance of language, finally, is signalled by the fact that Desai has written this novel in English but smuggles in many passages in German and words from Indian languages.

Characters

Hugo Baumgartner Hugo is the central character of the novel, which traces his life and death. Hugo grows up in a Jewish family Nazi Germany. He has a loving childhood but then watches his father being taken away to a concentration camp. Although his father returns safely, Hugo leaves the country and goes to India, where he is held in a British internment camp. Upon release, he ends up in Bombay where he lives the life of an impoverished exile.

Chimanlal Chimanlal is an Indian businessman who meets Hugo in Calcutta and later becomes his patron in Bombay. A wealthy man, he not only supports Hugo but also looks after him and lends him money to invest in a racehorse that they jointly own.

Lotte Lotte is another German who has fled Nazi Germany for India. She first meets Hugo when she is working as a cabaret dancer in Calcutta. She is also interned in a camp during the war but only briefly because she has romantic connections with Indian officials. Back in Bombay they meet again, after Lotte has lost another lover and been thrown out of his flat. She then becomes Hugo's lover for a brief time and they remain friends.

Farrokh Farrokh is a Gujarati man and the owner of a café where Hugo pretends he is a customer instead of a beggar. Farrokh is kind to the destitute Hugo and gives him scraps of food to feed to the stray cats he looks after. It is through Farrokh's eyes that we can see Hugo's destitute situation.

Hugo's father Hugo's father was a successful owner of a furniture store in Berlin. He wore rings and carried a cane as he walked the family around the streets of Berlin. When they stopped for a beer in a sidewalk cafe, he put little Hugo on his knee and let him have a sip of the brown liquid. He was a happy, loving man before the Nazis came to power. When he came back from the internment camp, he was a wreck and later committed suicide.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

HUGO (Disturbed)

Character

In Germany, Hugo is a happy child, who comes home from school with a hedgehog in his pocket, who comes back from the shops with the butter, and who finds his mother smiling with handfuls of candies. He is a beloved little boy who is fed cakes and allowed a surreptitious sip of beer. His character is then formed by the sight of his father returning from the concentration camp, a broken man, whimpering in the night. He becomes a permanent exile, and ends up in Bombay, where we meet him, with the 'habits of a hermit growing on him like some crustaceous effluent.' He is a disturbed but kind man, who cares for stray cats and spends half his day collecting food to feed them. And he is a defeated man, who is befriended and employed by Chimanlal and then (after Chimanlal's death) spurned by that man's son. He is a lonely man, who shuffles along the Bombay seafront, still regarded, after nearly 40 years in the country, as a foreigner. He cannot speak a local language and he has no means of self-support.

Activities

In Bombay, where most of the novel is set, Baumgartner spends his time on the seafront, where the cafés and restaurants tolerate his presence. He has no money to pay for his milky tea and soggy biscuits, but he performs small tasks for them. Delivering messages, picking up a package and sometimes sweeping the back area. In return, Hugo is given scraps of food to feed to the army of stray cats he keeps in his squalid flat. He had worked in a timber company and lived in a decent flat and had shared ownership of a winning racehorse, but now he has been turned out of that place and survives on the kindness of others.

Illustrative moments

Disturbed The pain of Hugo's exile is illustrated in an early scene when he witnesses his friend, and café-owner, Farrokh, turn away a young European tourist, a boy really, who comes begging. At first, he tells himself that he shouldn't care about this boy—'Let him boot him out, let him go to Goa or wherever. What did he care?' But he did care and he knew why. The tourist was a blonde-haired German. 'Hugo banged his fist on the table and hurried away. That fair hair, that physique, that angular face—it was a type that Hugo had escaped, forgotten. Then why had this figure come back to taunt him?' Hugo wants to forget his past—his happy childhood, his father's arrest, his fear of the Nazis—but in exile he cannot forget. It is all he has, and it disturbs him. In the passage quoted above, Desai uses interior monologue—we hear Hugo's thoughts unmediated by an author's voice—to show the twists and turns of memory and pain. It is also a wickedly ironic scene because this is the same German boy who will murder Hugo in the end.

Kind Despite his exile and his poverty, or perhaps because of them, Hugo is an extremely kind man. He shows compassion to anyone in trouble or distress, be it animal or human, Indian or European, rich or poor. A moving illustration of his kindness is displayed in the opening chapter of the novel, when we meet Hugo for the first time. He opens the door of his flat very carefully so that none of the cats slip out. Fritz, his latest feline ward, was 'still dragging its battered hind leg and with blood turned to a black and shining crust where its ear once was. Fritz is trying to get out and return to the streets where Hugo first found him. Hugo scooped him up and put him back. Then Mimi, a little girl kitten, tried to escape through his legs, but Hugo pushes her gently back inside, saying, 'Ach, mein liebchen [my little love], stay inside.' Then we watch the aging exile negotiate some rickety stairs and go toward a café, where he will collect scraps of meat to bring back home to his cats.

Lonely Hugo's predicament, his displacement and loneliness, begins long before he gets to India. It is apparent as soon as he leaves the cosy smells and sounds of his German home and travels overland to Venice, en route to Bombay. He lands there, with only a little money and full of apprehension, confused by the language and the vast differences between this old Ottoman port and the interior Bavarian town he grew up in. His unsettled situation is then dramatised in a brief scene in a restaurant, where he has trouble ordering because of the menu in Italian. Then he notices a young woman reading a newspaper printed in Hebrew. They talk a little and she seems attracted to him, inviting him to visit her studio. She is a painter. 'How long are you staying?' she asks. 'I'm going to India,' he says. 'India!' she shouts. 'No one goes to India—unless you're a sailor.' When she leaves, he follows but cannot find her. Here is the beginning of his loss and isolation, his inability to connect with anyone from his past.

CHIMANIAL (Generous)

Character

Chimanlal is an Indian businessman who becomes Hugo's friend and patron. When Hugo seeks him out after first landing in India, in Calcutta, with only a letter from his father's friend, Chimanlal immediately helps him. After Hugo's release from a detention camp when the war is over, Chimanlal sets him up with a job in the timber industry. In Bombay, he loans Hugo money to invest in a racehorse that brings them both some temporary income and several silver trophies, which he gives to Hugo. Chimanlal is a self-made man who acquired his fortune in the jewellery business, through the help of a Jewish man from Russia. Now he lives in a mansion not far from the Taj hotel, the most opulent hotel in India. He is also an ardent nationalist and tells Hugo, in 1945, two years before Independence, that the British will leave soon.

Activities

Chimanlal works hard, spending long hours in his office, but he also enjoys eating at fancy restaurants and going to the race course, especially after he buys a horse. We don't see much of

Chimanlal at home or with his family, and this is because so much of the novel is told through Hugo's eyes and experiences.

Illustrative moments

Generous Chimanlal's generosity toward Hugo is displayed throughout their friendship, but it is most striking when the two men first meet. Hugo has only a tattered letter of recommendation from a German man, a friend of his father, who once did business with Chimanlal. When Hugo arrives at his office in Bombay, Chimanlal has a quick glance at the letter, puts aside his work and takes Hugo out to lunch. 'He did not seem to require the letter of recommendation,' Desai writes. 'He acted according to his own instincts, which were large, free, always hospitable.' He orders a lamb dish for Mr 'Bommgarter' and vegetarian dishes for himself. 'So,' Chimanlal says after eating, 'we are going to do business together.' Hugo had his doubts, his uncertainties, but Chimanlal never entertained any. He gets Hugo a job, a salary and a little house. Hugo speculates that Chimanlal's generosity toward him might be based on the fact that he views him, a German, as an ally in the fight against the British. As readers, however, we know that Chimanlal has only a hazy understanding of world politics and that his generosity is simply a reflection of his deep-rooted trust of humanity.

Optimistic As an extension of that generosity and trust, Chimanlal is an optimistic man, believing not only in his own talents but also in the bright future predicted for him by astrology. One day, in 1945, he is lunching with Hugo on the seafront and looks out the window and sees the boats bobbing on the water. But there are also British soldiers everywhere in khaki uniforms, some of whom block his view. 'You see them?' Chimanlal asks Hugo, gesturing toward the swarms of soldiers on the seafront. 'You see them now, but they will go.' 'Are you sure?' Hugo asks. 'Of course,' Chimanlal says, bouncing up and down in his chair with confidence. He then regales Hugo with a very slanted version of the Indian independence movement, disparaging Gandhi with his 'non-violence nonsense' and saying that direct action, industrial strikes and 'possibly assassinations' will do the job. His brimming optimism is in sharp contrast to the stagnant depression that Hugo soon falls into. In his ebullience, the Indian businessman represents an entrepreneurial spirit, in part inherited from the West, which will lift India out of its poverty at the very moment that Hugo will be shuffling along on the Bombay seafront without a penny.

LOTTE (Lonely)

Character

Like the protagonist Hugo Baumgartner, Lotte is a German ex-patriot who flees Nazi Germany and ends up in India. Once there, her path (somewhat unbelievably) criss-crosses that of Hugo. They first meet in Calcutta, where she is dancing in a cabaret club. When she and another German girl are detained in a camp, they secure their release, it is assumed, through sexual favours with the Indian officials holding them. Later, she goes to Bombay, where she becomes the mistress of a wealthy man who sets her up in an upscale apartment. When the lover, Kanti, dies, his son throws her out and she becomes impoverished, like Hugo, whom she meets on the street one day. They become close friends, and briefly lovers. Like Hugo, she suffers from the loneliness of exile and displacement. But, unlike him, she hates her native Germany and its language, and drowns her sorrow in drink.

Activities

We learn about Lotte's life mostly through flashbacks, how she loved the cabaret dancing in Calcutta and the flashy life she lived as a mistress in Bombay. In those days as a mistress, she wore silk dresses and gold bangles, ran a hat shop and was driven along the seafront in new cars. Her happiness was only marred by the long days she had to endure, waiting for lover to visit her from Calcutta. Now, having been turned out by her dead lover's son, she is destitute, takes to drink and spends days and nights reminiscing with Hugo. She has many memories and occupies herself by imagining the old days, when she sang 'Lilli Marlene' and danced the Dying Swan in the Grand Palace Hotel in Calcutta.

Illustrative moments

Destitute Lotte's situation is, if anything, more precarious than Hugo's. She has never held a salaried job and has no patron; she only danced in a cabaret and was 'kept' as a mistress. Now, she is an aging woman with no legal hold on anything. Her destitution is illustrated in a scene, when Hugo visits her one day, having not seen her for some time. It is noon. She lets him in and staggers back

to the sofa and collapses. 'Drinking this early?' Hugo asks. 'Not the crack of dawn, is it?' she answers with a slur. Then she explains what happened. After Kanti, her lover, died, his son, whom she had cared for and cooked for, disowned her. He refused to recognise her link with his father and she was not allowed to see the dead body. Then came the long court cases by which the son reclaimed all the gifts given to her by his father. Hugo looks at her and sees a once-beautiful, now-faded face, a befuddled mind with no future.

Peaceful Despite her deprivation, Lotte is not bitter and appears peaceful. This restfulness is beautifully described in a scene in her apartment when, after love-making, she is asleep beside Hugo. Desai writes: 'Like a cat, she pressed against him, nuzzling and nibbling, without speech. With small groans, she made herself comfortable with the body beside her, finding concavities into which to press her convexities, and convexities into which to press her concavities, until they made one complete whole. Then she slept the heavy noontime sleep of the tropics, sighing less and less and then immobile and silent.' She and Hugo are mirror-images of one another: both exiles from Germany, both thrown out of a flat by the son of the owner after the latter's death, both without a future and only a marzipan-sweetened past that is receding into the distance.

Alone Perhaps the most moving paragraphs in the novel occur in the opening pages, when Lotte discovers Hugo's murdered body in his apartment and flees the 'blood-splattered scene.' At first, she experiences horror but later, when she has retreated to her own flat, she feels the desolation of loneliness. She had always been alone, even when she was in a good relationship with a lover, because she did not belong where she was. It was not part of her being. Now, she has lost Hugo, her only real friend. She looks out the window, at the scene she always sees, but now it was empty, blank. She looks away and sees the postcards she has rescued from Hugo's flat. Written by his now-dead mother, they are full of tender German words for 'sweetheart', 'dear' and 'little rabbit.' She sees the words and feels them cut her like glass, for they transport her to her own idyllic childhood in Germany, with the marzipan and chocolates. She tasted the suffocating sweetness of her earliest memories, then she broke down and wept.