

Baumgartner Bounced by Bombay: Malady of Exclusion and Beyond

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Abstract - In the decades of postcolonial triumph, dis/re-location and disjuncture have ensued the discourse on power and its distribution with less emphasis on the complex transformation of colonial capitals into postcolonial metropolitans, especially in reference to their raging cosmopolitan policy and ethics. Apart from inclusivity as a virtue of cosmopolitanism, albeit exclusion, or involuntary acculturation are merely pretended rarity or repression engraved. Now, in this context, if assimilation is the most suitable method of survival to avoid irreconcilable alienation, then failure to do so suggests nothing worse but imminent tragedy. Such a tragic story is my case in point - *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988) by Anita Desai. Few issues this text instigates to probe into are: (1) the agencies or factors dissent to which brought a tragic destiny to Baumgartner? (2) major obstacles to conform to assimilation. And finally, (3) the conceptual inadequacy to designate the experience of Baumgartner as Diasporic exile, or dystopian expatriation; or a fated wandering Jew succumbing to stereotypical callous anonymity; or something else altogether? This paper attempts to study the above mentioned literary-cultural disputes through the prism of psychoanalysis (specifically, trauma theory) and racial antagonism as shifting the barriers of power accumulation and assertion by following the larger framework of history of Jewish diaspora and the story of Hugo Baumgartner.

Index Terms - diaspora, Holocaust, Jews, right to exclude, hippy, etc.

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts to focus on few relevant issues as a matter of inspection and introspection –the trajectory of a German Jew fleeing Nazi persecution to the colonized oriental, India or ‘Hindoostan,’ living in exile after a few failed attempts at the business prospect with a queer love for rescuing and nourishing deserted injured cat; finally succumbing to the destiny

of being murdered by Kurt, another German, a Nazi German; why did the tragedy come upon Baumgartner? The first part concentrates on the diasporic survival during a tumultuous world affair and its consequent transformation. Desai presents an exquisite epitome of the Jewish diaspora in India, perhaps a tragically unsuccessful diaspora, and its fatal conclusion without any resolution. The second part deals with how it is a failed migration or passive diaspora. And why? Who or what is at fault? Was there any possibility for Baumgartner to be a successful diasporic, even if with adjusted assimilation? This narrative bargain the ethical and political standards of citizenship as a legal form of social inclusion to get rid of diasporic alienation. Though the final part of the paper slightly deals with the passive efforts at incurring acceptability through victimhood being subjected to pity and inconsistent compassion, the discussion can be extended to a comparative analysis of the concept of citizenship (as an extended/more aspired attainment of diasporic identity) and the failure in doing so. This case can pose a detrimental theoretical requirement pertaining to the concept of state-sponsored citizenship. Desai attempts to find a place for Baumgartner in the Indian literary oeuvre, if not in the Indian citizenry.

Is it Baumgartner’s failure? Is Baumgartner a threat to the cosmopolitan prestige of Bombay? This paper deals with the complex chemistry of migration, state, and citizen/-ship in the discourse of diaspora. How integral are exclusionary rights to a society? How much claim for the right to be included does a migrant or perceived outsider hold? More importantly, if Bombay, Calcutta, Venice – the declared metropolitans are cosmopolitan by virtue, then is there a place for Baumgartner, a German Jew, a stateless Jew, a wandering Jew, to seek consideration?

II. RIGHT TO EXCLUSION/INCLUSION

Not surprisingly, exclusion or alienation is hardly voluntary or highly oppressive. Yet, voluntary exile or social detachment involves sanction of will. Worthwhile it is to explore the circumstantial predicates that insinuate legitimacy or systematic approval for exclusion and more so, when the state legitimacy determines and is determined by the public sphere, especially in the context of the exclusion/inclusion paradigm.

Inclusion, Habermas (2001: 73) states, “means that the political community stays open to include citizens of any background without confining those Others within the uniformity of a homogeneous national community.” Ideal it may sound, yet not without the responsibility of the ‘included’ to maintain ethical good life following the norms and a strong consent to the existing political community. Political, not national acculturation is demanded of the immigrants or refugees seeking acceptance in the host society. (Habermas, 1998:228-32) Quite interestingly, political inclusion allows for difference (ethnic) and otherness (cultural), but cultural inclusion is conditional on how much the foreigner adjusts on ethical-moral grounds. The difference in ethical-moral standards inevitably trouble the prevalent system of order and code of conduct, and violation of the same should never be tolerated by any political community or by the state legislation because through ethical-moral reconciliation only tolerance can be obtained. Indifference is never an alternative and often leads to gradual mutation of self-existence with deteriorated dignity and illegibility of state sponsorship. Baumgartner chose to follow the latter – existence through indifference. For almost fifty years, incredulity never trespasses his ethics of living or being. Probably, catastrophe owes a lot to his fundamental rigidity of self-confinement and rare mutuality.

As a foreigner has the right to associate or to find inclusion, the right to exclude or deny association on moral-ethical grounds must be given a valid consideration to the citizens in the discourse of struggle for political-cultural (national for Habermas) belonging. After Habermas, arguing that under liberal democracy immigration promotes vulnerability, nonetheless, a threat to the nature of community and thus, Michael Blake concludes that “where a

community would be undermined by the existence of immigrant(s) – where it would not be able to produce what community produces –that community is right to exclude.”(Blake, 2014: 10) Though not enough transparent is Baumgartner’s contribution to the community or society at large towards a positive effect, leaving aside profit from horse racing and a few failed attempts to restart the furniture business, which culminates in his fragile productivity merely establishing his unworthiness and parasitic status before the society and the State.

The instance of Hippie culture with the immigration of many like deserted, diverted, troubling, disorderly, maniacal, parasitical Kurt finds extended relevance of Blake’s theses. Desai aggravates the discourse through Farookh by expressing utter disgust for the Hippie community and asserting them as a threat to national culture and order. Their all sorts of un/ultra-traditional activities in the name of exalted individuality often disregard the larger principles of conventional community culture. In fact, Baumgartner’s murder is vivid enough of maniacal turbulence such roguish insane(s) create. Hence, no wise community would allow entry to such anti-social, degraded human beings with any sense of humanity. Though Baumgartner is unlike the Hippies, nonetheless, shares the least commonality with the society of his surroundings reminds Blake’s explanation that “some sort of commonality is needed for the shared liberal community, and that exclusion is in turn needed for this sort of commonality.” (Blake, 2014: 10) The following rendering of Baumgartner clarifies the central problem of being excluded or excluding himself strategically:

“...[N]othing, then, was what life dwindled down to, but Baumgartner found he enjoyed that nothing more than he had enjoyed anything... he felt only relief that his had never been a part of the mainstream. Always, somehow, he had escaped the mainstream.” [BB, 2007: 251-52]

Baumgartner has a mistaken belief that exile or self-confinement, perhaps, is the best way for him to deny the historical trauma of Jew persecution during the Holocaust and the guilt of a survivor of that traumatic past. Unfortunately, it must fail. Every encounter with people earns with impassioned attention bereaved of compassionate acknowledgment of the history plunders him to the root at the risk of confronting the traumatic experience repeatedly. Neither is he

courageous to embrace history nor is he embraced without that history. History or past undoes every attempt of repression. Explicit is the assaults of history. Now, isn't it obvious for the state not to accept the historical man who doesn't accept his own history? Even the legitimate objection against state sponsorship must be withdrawn following the following explication by Blake:

“States, being made up of people, have the right to be free from forced association, whether that involves being forcibly assimilated into a larger state, or being made to take in unwanted members. In both cases, the state is free to resist the unwanted association; it is able to do this because the members of that state have the right to decide with whom they will associate, in the street and in the marketplace. Self-determination, on this view, consists in the right of a legitimate state to decide its future for itself – and that freedom includes the right to be free from the unwanted association.” (Blake, 2014: 11)

Hence, Baumgartner's apparent right to be included or to be excluded has nobody else to entitle as responsible. Though contingent, mutual approach, and efforts have borne fruit in the recorded history of diaspora relocation or settlement. Instead of that, Hugo Baumgartner constructed an illusion through the disguise of ignorance. ...[I]gnorance 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.” (BB, 2007: 261) – with deliberate consciousness and un-pretended gesture, Baumgartner fences himself with a strict protocol of ignorance, rather of indifference, a determined indifference towards the mass and their fuss, their hectic life and chaotic dwelling. This noble indifference assured his exiled individuality beyond any hostility as a host, beyond any intolerable racism, beyond, except for Kurt, led by an ambiguous instinct. Was it because being a German Baumgartner was expected to shoulder the responsibility (and blame, scorn, the stigma of disorderly livelihood) for Kurt to exhibit some ethical empathy towards the host state worth state appraisal, out of mere kindness towards a destitute (like him) worth rescuing as an attempt to let the survivor's guilt be cleansed (of Holocaust, letting her mother be its victim)? Sicher and Weinhouse (2011) explain that the “bond that exists between Baumgartner and Kurt, his mortal enemy, ultimately leads to his death. When this blood tie is recognized

between Germans and German Jews, it is often acknowledged as a tie that binds the perpetrators of the Holocaust and their victims.

Reconsidering behavioral aggression of Kurt resulting murder of Baumgartner it wouldn't be too wrong to conjecture that had Baumgartner established more social conformity the tragedy could have been abated. Besides it being a motive of racial enmity, I find an unethical or antisocial livelihood is giving vent to such aggression irrespective of historical malevolence. Now, which society would accept a stereotypical Hippie like Kurt or his rescuer with Baumgartner? No lawful society would accommodate or accept such a threat. No society would extend sympathy for such social antagonists. Such foreign elements must be removed with an exemplary persecution in favor of strengthening social values and cultural sanctity. Hence, Baumgartner's victimhood rests to a great extent on his choice of livelihood or association. Scholarly condemnation of the harbinger of victimhood sometimes requires a methodological revision to look within – the individual and its preferences. Victim narrative has a fashion of emphasizing the external factors, instead, a look inward method may prove more revealing worth accountable. When it comes to victimhood the external factors like State policy and un-/written norms of society are to be held responsible, instead of interrogating the victim to uphold the values of society and obeying the norms of the State. Even, to what extent it is right to certify victimhood to Baumgartner is a matter of further inquiry. The discourse of victimhood must share a theoretical obligation to indulge in non-external factors. This methodology may prove worthy to obtain accountable revelations. With a promising discussion of the elaborate journey of Hugo Baumgartner and canonical emigration experience which proves nothing but a continuation of the previous exclusion in Germany, it pertains to whether Baumgartner has a place of belonging or not. Lotte, another Holocaust-fled emigrant, and friend to Hugo confirm 'no home'. However, Baumgartner felt a sense of belonging at Venice, of canonical origin of Shylock[s] or Othello[s]. He felt like holding a 'natural citizenship' over there. Following discussion deals with his indefinite quest for natural belonging, taking little liberty of unempirical arrogance.

III. QUEST FOR NATURAL CITIZENSHIP

Overwhelming control of the State as an organized system or authority to issue legislation with the mandate of ethical judiciary traces its history back to ancient human civilizations. Two obvious categories of state-sponsored identity used to exist throughout recorded history – (1) state legitimized identity, and (2) outsider/ foreigner (may be a citizen of other states, or a mere wanderer). Hence, an outsider irrespective of being state disposed or state-less used to hold the stigma of a perpetual outsider. Such socio-political pattern has not witnessed much significant transformation or delusion of the well-maintained conceptual boundaries in their manifestations. In the case of Baumgartner, the narrator envisages a dwelling where existence is mutual, and survival is collaterally agreed for Baumgartner to an uncertain extent. As it reads:

“...Venice was the East, and yet it was Europe too; it was that magic boundary where the two met and blended, Hugo had been a part of their union. He realized ...that during his constant wandering, his ceaseless walking, he had been drawing closer and closer to this discovery of that bewitched point where they became one land of which he felt himself the natural citizen.” [BB,78-9]

To discern is difficult whether it is a mere thought pleasure or a model of the prospective transnational citizenry. Because Venice was the station in his journey to India, his ultimate refuge, so it may prove to be the contact zone between East and West. To facilitate Baumgartner’s thoughtful appreciation of Venice as a conglomeration of Eastern sweetness (consist of the overcrowded market with enchanting products, lively people, underdevelopment, etc.) and Western sharpness marked by lavish and luxurious public conduct with profound sophistication, civilizational superiority, etc. this proves to be a disproportionate, yet healthy coexistence of accident and orient. But Baumgartner fails to anticipate a disillusionment lurking on his entry into the complete, crude orient, India. However, this catastrophic exile may suggest the requirement of a huge transformation of space – transnational in nature and prescribed non-static identity (or, imposed/limited to state). Despite being a reluctant, inactive, stupidly introspective, self-confined, un-social, indecent in appearance, of queer passion, fearful, Baumgartner has remained mute against the state and the public sphere through his narrow indifference and active ignorance, by

disproving the state as un-blameworthy for his predicament. Hence, considering the limitation of the state, however little or less, in providing security and in obtaining basic rights as a legal subject, Baumgartner feels at home, Venice, as an alternative geopolitical space that endeavors natural citizenry.

Entire reliance on this sacred concept of ‘natural citizenship’ would be no less impractical because a structural review of the narrative suggests the Venice episode as the intermission or narrative leisure in which Baumgartner encountered the city space as most refreshing after a traumatic departure and still mostly imagined Indian orient, perhaps, convinced him of a promising livelihood when compared to the Indian one. Apart from few favorable instances like Baumgartner’s search for the Jewish ghetto, or the unacquainted woman’s informal interrogation with the slightest suspicion, that complete adherence to the idea of Venice would have been an easy-going, without considering racial enmity or cultural hostility and social rivalry would prove a fatal impracticality. Moreover, his repetitive yearn for the Jewish gathering, as a culminating opportunity to feel included and unified against the feeling of being excluded or deserted implies his utter favour for Venice and the opposite for Bombay. So, as an unguaranteed utopic dwelling as Venice has impressed Baumgartner may be a conceptualization arising out of his irrational perception of the well-favoured space with little impracticality involved under the affection of mere desperation. This desperation would only lead to utter disillusionment as happened in Bombay as one of the possible consequences. However utopian the idea of natural citizenship may sound; it holds an essential gut in favour of the emerging trend of human movement and mass distribution seeking transnational politico-cultural climate to be observed. A fluid zone, potentially arid for state coercion and protocol imposition, rather this space would promote tolerance and ethics of social co-existence by rejuvenating a universal inclusivity/ accommodation for the victims of political hostility and state-sponsored carnage attempting to escape, even if futile, the burden of historical trauma for many like Baumgartner. Desire for such a fluid space is inherently imaginary as conceived by Salman Rushdie’s *Imaginary Homelands* (1992) – for Baumgartner Venice functions as a “transitional space between the West and the West that is both and neither a place of desire

nor longing which is always left unfulfilled.” (p.28, Sicher and Weinhouse,2011)

The concept of belonging earns a new spectrum through Baumgartner’s psychic demography curated by Desai. Scar or the scent of Germany haunts him. Even after residing in Bombay for more than thirty years, he could earn an apostrophe to attribute psychic incorporation of Bombay- Bombay imagined according to his convenience and conscience; Bombay of Hugo Baumgartner oriented with memory, mother, and malevolence. This narrative couldn’t be entitled as Bombay’s Baumgartner. This alternative appropriately draws a debate on the contention of ownership. Should the place be accepting or the individual? Or both be accepting and accepted without collateral damage. The title aims to justify Desai’s ‘accepting’, ‘not accepted’ theses which prove to be abundantly absent in the protagonist’s practice and psychogeography. However, a large repertoire of criticism on this book hisses their liberal advocacy against the assassination of multiculturalism or cosmopolitan restraint in the case of Baumgartner, a welfare state should abide by the priorities of its citizens and mandate policy without engendering their rights and might. Good governance must have regulations to filter all sorts of infiltration to strengthen nation and nationhood before the country suffers due to refugees. To combat the refugee crisis, the UN and other international bodies must intervene and ensure the parent country undertakes necessary measures and maintain a peaceful bilateral relationship with neighboring nations.

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