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## **The Postcolonial Jew in Anita Desai's *Baumgartner's Bombay* and Caryl Phillips' *The Nature of Blood***

Beth Rosenberg

### **Abstract**

Anita Desai's *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988) and Caryl Phillips' *The Nature of Blood* (1997) are novels that feature Jewish protagonists; both represent the history of the Holocaust and diverge from the postcolonial landscapes the authors are associated with. Though the Indian Desai and the Anglo-Caribbean Phillips are distinct as postcolonial subjects, their Jewish protagonists help to create what Rebecca Walkowitz terms "comparison literature," the "work of books that analyse... the transnational contexts of their own production, circulation, and study." In other words, Desai and Phillips are interested in the structures and dynamics of ethnic identification in a global context. Through what I term the postcolonial Jew, these novels move beyond the notion of ethnic authenticity to a cosmopolitan view of identity as hybrid and positional. The authenticity of and in these novels does not rely on the authors' ethnic backgrounds, but is found in their ways of telling history. Their intention is to break from the traditional association of Jews with the Judeo-Christian tradition, to represent them instead as separate from the Occidental tradition. As a result, Desai and Phillips utilise a decentred Jew, one who is constantly in flux, disparate, conflicted, and the embodiment of diaspora. The existential condition of this Jew —the placeless place he is called upon to inhabit, which the reader is invited to visit— and the paradoxical states of belonging and displacement become the conditions of all displaced others and represent the constant deferral of meaning in the narrative act.

Anita Desai's *Baumgartner's Bombay* and Caryl Phillips' *The Nature of Blood* are novels that feature Jewish protagonists. Both novels represent the history of the Holocaust and diverge from the postcolonial landscapes the authors are associated with. Bénédicte Ledent points to the mystification that reviewers experience with Phillips' novel, "as if, by leaving the literary ghetto to which sacred rules of authenticity would have confined him, Phillips had claimed a more direct say on the human

condition at large, and had thereby committed literary trespass, an offence taken seriously by some mainstream critics” (121-22).<sup>1</sup> Desai has also had to respond to questions about her use of a Jewish protagonist.<sup>2</sup> In both cases, their critics define ethnic identity as something essentialised in personality and assume that someone Other than a Jew cannot write authentically about Jewish experience.

Though the Indian Desai and the Anglo-Caribbean Phillips are distinct as postcolonial subjects, their Jewish protagonists help to create what Rebecca Walkowitz terms “comparison literature,” the “work of books that analyze ...the transnational contexts of their own production, circulation, and study” (536). In his discussion of Desai and Phillips, Bryan Cheyette also argues for “comparative histories—impure, unbounded and diasporic,” where there is the “interplay of communities within and across borders” (57). In other words, it is not the authenticity of the writing subject that Desai and Phillips are interested in, but rather the structures and dynamics of ethnic identification in a global context. Through what I term their postcolonial Jews, these novels move beyond the notion of ethnic authenticity to a cosmopolitan view of identity as hybrid and positional.<sup>3</sup> This essay also argues that the authenticity of and in these novels does not rely on the authors’ ethnic backgrounds, but is found in their ways of telling history. Their intention is to break from the traditional association of Jews with the Judeo-Christian tradition, to represent them instead as separate from the Occidental tradition. As a result, Desai and Phillips utilize a decentred Jew, one who is constantly in flux, disparate, conflicted, and the embodiment of diaspora. The existential condition of this Jew—the placeless place he is called upon to inhabit, which the reader is invited to visit—and the paradoxical states of belonging and displacement become the conditions of all displaced others and represent the constant deferral of meaning in the narrative act.

Before I delve into an explication of the complicated narrative strategies used by each author, I would like to address the nature of ethnic identity as well as the position of the ‘stranger’ within culture. In his discussion of Black British identity, Stuart Hall makes the distinction between an “old logics of identity” (42) and one based on a “new set of theoretical spaces” (47). The old logics sees identity as “a notion of the continuous, self-sufficient, developmental, unfolding, inner dialectic of selfhood” (42), and it guarantees an authentic and original identity. The second notion of identity, grounded in post-structural versions of feminism and psychoanalysis, has shown us that “identities are never completed, never finished; that they are always as subjectivity itself is, in process” (47). Put more succinctly, psychoanalysis has determined the “degree to which that structure of identification is always constructed through

ambivalence,” always “constructed through splitting” (47). This splitting is between “that which one is, and that which is the other” (48). It is here that the old logic of identity does not serve anymore: its stability and wholeness cannot account for the position of the Other, those outside of the self, in its creation. Hall’s provocative reading of identity claims that the Other, the stranger, the thing that is not us, is necessary to our own identification. In addition, we can only know the Other from the place we stand, our position in relation to the identity outside of ourselves. This notion of identity is dialogical and could be told as “two histories, one over here, one over there, never having spoken to one another, never having anything to do with another”(48).

Another way to describe the Jew that reinforces the notion of the ethnic Other as positionally related to the subject is through Georg Simmel’s concept of the “stranger.” As he describes it, the stranger is one who “comes today and stays tomorrow —the potential wanderer...who, although he has gone no further, has not quite got over the freedom of coming and going”(143). He is one who is “fixed within a certain spatial circle —or within a group whose boundaries are analogous to spatial boundaries— but his position within it is fundamentally affected by the fact that he does not belong in it initially and that he brings qualities into it that are not, and cannot be, indigenous to it.” The stranger is an “element of the group itself ...an element whose membership within the group involves being both outside it and confronting it” (144).The protagonists in both *Baumgartner’s Bombay* and *The Nature of Blood* are consummate strangers, both part of their communities and outsiders to them. Their liminal positions are represented through images of boundaries and circumvention that are essential to their understanding of themselves.

Desai’s *Baumgartner’s Bombay* focuses on the wanderings and exile of Hugo Baumgartner, who escapes Nazi Germany as a teenager and migrates to India. The novel begins with the character Lotte’s response to Hugo’s death, the exact place the novel ends. This structure is a conventional framed narrative, much like Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, with the body of the novel functioning as flashback. But as we enter the novel, the narrative becomes more complicated, and Hugo’s identity as Jew and stranger metamorphosises through a series of ambivalent positions. We are introduced to him, not at the beginning of his life, but near the end; it is a routine morning in India as he leaves his small apartment home to collect scraps for his cats. Passing stalls, Himalayan talking mynas, Arabs, a fortune teller, and beggars, Hugo, as one “who did not belong,” reflects on how “oriental, how exotic” he used to think it all was (19). Having lived in India for fifty years, it all “no longer seemed fantastic and exotic; it was

utterly familiar” though the people who looked at him still saw one “who was strange and unfamiliar to them, and all said: *Firanghi*, foreigner” (19). Though the world of India no longer appears strange to him, he still maintains unfamiliarity to it. Through language the Jewish Hugo, a stranger both in and to India, is set out as both close and remote, familiar with the culture he inhabits and yet utterly separate from it.

Desai emphasises the function of language in the construction of identity by introducing English, German, and Hindi—all of which Baumgartner interacts with and is conscious of. When he is called “*firanghi*, foreigner” he knows it means, “Accepting—but not accepted; that was the story of his life, the one thread that had run through it.” In Germany he had “been dark—his darkness had marked him Jew, *der Jude*. In India he was fair—and that marked him *firanghi*. In both lands, the unacceptable” (20). Racial identity is mediated through language, and Baumgartner’s position allows him to see the irony and ambivalence in linguistic identification. The multifarious nature of India is found in the languages the pervade Desai’s novel; like identity itself, languages “sprouted around [Hugo] like tropical foliage and he picked words from it without knowing if they were English or Hindi or Bengali—they were simply words” (92). His patchwork approach to language is his way of delineating “the India he was marking out for himself” (92), and it was “desperately important to belong and make a place for himself” (93). Even language, which is used to define ethnic identity through its unifying force, cannot function in a stable manner. Both the environment and language reflect Hugo’s split and fractured sense of self. It is only as a stranger in this world that Hugo finds some understanding of himself.

Desai lingers on a description of Hugo’s liminal position through a meditation on his experience in Venice, where after he leaves Germany he awaits the ship “to the Orient” (57). Cheyette reminds us that Venice has historically been considered a “hybrid space” and that “the long history of imperial dominance and uncontained racialised difference made Venice a significant mirror for colonial anxiety” (61). Venice in this novel, as well as in Phillip’s *The Nature of Blood*, is a liminal geography; neither here nor there, it is both East and West. In Venice the protagonists of both novels feel the most free as hybrid identities, where they are not forced to choose between the inside and outside of culture. While in Venice, Hugo considers finding the Jewish Quarter. He reflects how “in Germany he had never wanted to search them out.” He knew others had thought him a Jew but had never really regarded himself as one. Only when outside of Germany does he have a perspective on his identity: “In ejecting him, Germany had taught him to regard himself as [a Jew]” (62). He thinks that in Venice, perhaps, “he would find for himself a new identity” (62), a new position from which to

know himself. Venice “*was* the East, and yet it was Europe too; it was that magic boundary where the two met and blended” (63). Hugo “had been drawing closer and closer to this discovery of that bewitched point where they became one land of which he felt himself a natural citizen” (63). In Venice he finds “another world; perhaps it was where Jewry was located but to him it was the East, and he was both in it and travelling to it, at a distance and yet one with it” (64). Hugo reflects on Venice as an idea of his “natural home,” and it becomes a place of multiple and unclear identities and boundaries. In response to Lotte’s comment that there “is no home” for them, Hugo articulates what Venice means to him: “[I]t was both East and West, both Europe and Asia” and perhaps in this ambiguous place he “could be at home” (81). Like Simmel’s stranger, Hugo is “one who is close by [and] is remote, but his strangeness indicates that one who is remote is [also] near” (143). His new identity is both a position of liminality and alienation, and it is in Venice that he recognises this.

Hugo carries his liminal position with him, and his first vision of India is described in terms of its diverse positions and perspectives, where everything “had seemed bedlam” (83) and a chaotic mix of images and ethnicities. He sees “the crowds, of Indians, of Britons, Americans, Gurkhas –coolies...officers...hawkers and traders...*membahibs* and blonde children...Indian women” (83). This hybrid of diverse ethnicities and social class present a complex whole which the narrative describes as a “heaving mass” (83) brought together by an “invasion of light...and heat” (83). The assault he feels is as though India “flashed the mirror in [his] face,” and he could “be blinded by it” (85). The chaos and diversity are hardly what Hugo feels he needs to define himself. India reflects the self like a mirror, and in that mirror Hugo sees a fragmented world, full of multiple races, genders, and ages. It is possible, however, to circumvent this fragmented sense of self because India itself allows you to do this. One can continue to look into and be overwhelmed by what is seen in the mirror, but “if you refused to look into it, if you insisted on walking around to the back, then India stood aside, admitting you where you had not thought you could go. India was two worlds, or ten” (85). The mirror holds up the image of fragmentation, but behind it one may find many other worlds easier to cope with.

Hugo’s sense of alienation and strangeness finds its metaphorical expression in the passages regarding his time in the British internment camp. Desai makes it clear that the camp is circumscribed and bounded in order to separate it from the rest of the country. It is here that “aliens” are deposited to wait out the war. Identities get confused, Germans are mixed with German-Jews in the British central camp because they are all considered “hostile aliens,” and no distinctions are made. Echoing Hugo’s

first impression of India, the internment camp represents a whole identity composed of chaos and mixing of differences. During the first few days all those interned “milled around like a herd of cattle in a cloud of dust that would not settle” (107). Hugo sees “efforts being made at imposing some order. ... Timetables were pinned to notice-boards. ...The men queued up in order to collect blankets. ...They queued up again” to eat. This is a desperate attempt to create boundaries and structure for everyone involved but there are too many absences, “too many empty spaces and these proved difficult to accept” (108). Among all this Hugo remains a “solitary foreigner” (109).

The most poignant passage to demonstrate Hugo’s sense of self within the camp is as he watches the native, Indian women outside the camp carrying “excreta on their heads, and digging their hands into it as they might into wet dough or laundry,” which they do to make fuel to burn in their homes. But by watching them he begins to “envy them that simplicity, the absence of choice and history.” His life seemed “hopelessly tangled and unsightly, symbolized aptly by the strands of barbed wire wrapped around the wooden posts and travelling in circles and double circles around the camp” (111). Bounded by the barbed wire in the camp Hugo, both an insider and an alien, watches those outside the camp who help him to discover his own position. The paradigm of identity transposes itself from Germany to India and indicates the repetition and recreation of paradigms of ethnic identification. Like the ants Hugo watches during his monotonous days, his sense of identity becomes an “endless repetition of forms and actions that blurred and turned into an endless labour” (119). Repetition, mimicry, and the concentric circles of identity entrap and yet comfort Hugo.

Instead of feeling elation when the war is over and he is freed from the camp, Hugo dreads the loss of both his Jewish comrades and the barriers and boundaries that helped him to identify with them. He knew “it was craven not to desire freedom, but it was true that captivity had provided him with an escape, from the fate of those in Germany, and from the safety from the anarchy of the world outside” (131). He begins to fear the time when his identification with other Jews, “of Julius, of Schwarz, of others in the camp who had become familiar” because he could “pretend he was not solitary” (133). Once he returns to Bombay he feels a sense of panic that makes the “internment camp seem privileged, an area of order and comfort” (162). He wishes he could “return to that enclosed world, the neat barracks...the fixed hours” (162). Boundaries, limits, and structures help Hugo to feel complete, whole, and settled. However, this state is temporary and the implications of an authentic and stable identity are dire. First, the sense of unambiguous identification is temporary, and it also limits the freedom to move beyond the boundaries set up for him. Hugo is willing

to sacrifice freedom for safety, for once outside the camp he becomes “a man without a family or a country” (133).

Once placed back into the society of Bombay, Hugo no longer feels a sense of “nostalgia,” the desire to go back to what is familiar. He does not search out the company of Europeans. Looking back at his time in internment, he realizes that it was then that he decided “he would not wish to live in a pack, that he did not need the pack” (150). Even his desire to connect through the German language leaves him, and his language becomes no more than the “taste of English words or the small vocabulary of bastardised Hindustani” he picked up over the years. There is a fair-sized population of Europeans in Bombay who he stays away from because he dislikes their “probing questions, their determination to discover his background, his circumstances, his past and present and future, before they accepted him” (150). He has a visceral sense that his identity is not lodged in the core of his being, that he does not carry around an authentic self within his experience. Hugo’s distance from others throughout the narrative is described as Hugo’s desire for privacy and solitude, but the constant framing and boundaries used to represent his positionality illustrate that the authentic self is non-existent, and that Hugo’s identity is always a function of what he is surrounded by.

Ultimately, the instability of an authentic identity crashes in on itself through the repetition of conflict and difference. Returning from the internment to Calcutta, Hugo confronts the great partition of India. He visits his ex-business partner, Habibullah, looking to retrieve his old job, and Habibullah is shocked at Hugo’s ignorance of the conflict between Hindus and Muslims. His descriptions of activities in Calcutta repeat and mimic those that Hugo escaped in Nazi Germany. Habibullah tells him, “India is finished. Don’t you know, every night they come and threaten us in our house? Every night they set some Muslim house on fire, stab some Muslim on the street, rob him too. Don’t you know *sahib*, they are driving us out” (168). He urges Hugo to flee, but Hugo refuses to see the pattern of cultural difference. Echoing James Joyce, Desai writes that history is a “great web in which each one was trapped, a nightmare from which one could not emerge” (173). Her narrative demonstrates this sense of entrapment through the endless repetition of history Hugo confronts.

After Hugo leaves Habibullah, he wanders the streets, and Desai describes this as a wandering through identities that reflect the merging and mixture of cultures. The slums he walks through are “a complete contrast to the European quarter he had known before the war with its air of an eastern colonial port.” He walks through the “Anglo-Indian quarter that separated the European from the Bengali” and finds “no joy



in the streets where he walked aimlessly, compulsively” (171). Hugo tries to resist his ambivalent position within Indian culture: “His war was not their war. And they had had their own war.” However, as Desai describes it, the separation from other ethnic selves is impossible, “War within war within war. Everyone engaged in a separate war, and each war opposed to another war.” For Hugo there is always “another will opposed to one’s own...not the one of one’s choice or even making” (171). The conflated and conflicted nature of India and its inhabitants, including Hugo, illustrates that there is no inherent core of identity that binds them together.

Like Desai’s *Baumgartner’s Bombay*, Caryl Phillips’ *The Nature of Blood* investigates the complex historical and intersectional narratives of ethnic identity. Phillips’ too problematises the notion of authentic identity, where the “nature of blood” relations cross in surprising and unpredictable ways. Unlike the framed narrative that holds Desai’s novel together, Phillips’ narrative functions through juxtaposition by weaving seemingly unconnected plot lines together into a whole. In this way his narrative metaphorically represents the dynamic between self and Other described by Hall, where two histories, unknown to each other, never speak or have anything to do with each other. Narrative in Phillips’ novel is like ethnic identity, fragmented and split without a central narrative core to unify them.

The historical narrative threads in Phillips’ novel include that of the migration to and the founding of Israel in 1948, the first-person narration of the German-Jewish Eva Stern during and after her internment in a Nazi extermination camp, a third-person description of three Jews in fifteenth-century Venice who are accused of ritually murdering a Christian boy, the imagined history of the Moor Othello who abandons his African wife for the Venetian Desdemona, and the stories of Stephan, a German Jew who abandons his wife and children to join the Palestinian underground, and the nurse Malka, an Ethiopian Jew who struggles for acceptance in contemporary Israel. Though connected by themes of race and ethnicity, these plots are self-contained. Each narrative is juxtaposed against the other, feeding each other but never fully connecting into a whole or complete story. Unlike Desai’s novel, which closes with Hugo’s death, Phillips’ work is open ended, as though there are more stories to be told. Although utilising a different strategy than Desai, Phillips too represents the repetition of cultural history and the entrapment of ethnic groups within the dynamic of positionality.

*The Nature of Blood* begins with an emphasis on geographical space and boundaries, and it questions the origins of national identity. Moshe, a young Jewish migrant, asks the narrator, “Tell me, what will be the name of the country?” (3). The

country he refers to is Israel, but at this moment he and the narrator reside in Cyprus. It is 1946, and Cyprus is a British territory where Jewish immigrants wait in an internment camp. They are considered “illegal aliens,” their ships having been turned away by the British at the Palestinian ports. The narrator is a volunteer doctor from Palestine (who we find out later is Stephan, Eva’s uncle), and the boy Moshe is of Romanian origin, one of many orphaned young Jews. Boundaries are established to contain the Jews, first by depositing them on the Mediterranean island and then by establishing “the perimeter of the camp,” allowing British tanks to be “stationed at regular intervals” and given the “task of guarding unarmed men, women and children” (6). The reader is immediately introduced to exile and diaspora embodied by the Jews, strangers to Cyprus and limited by the boundaries of the internment camp. Like the camp in Baumgartner’s story, this internment camp creates order out of limits to make the Jews a manageable and unified group. As Moshe asks the name of this new country, we are reminded by the narrator that this place, Israel, will be a new “homeland,” a place with the potential to define Jewish identity.

The novel then moves into its second narrative thread, that of Eva Stern whose story dominates most of the novel. Eva speaks in first person, and we are introduced to her at her liberation from the concentration camp. British soldiers circulate through this environment as they attempt to make sense of what they find. Eva’s consciousness is disoriented, and she describes a scene she herself does not understand. We are taken through flashback to her history, her parents, and their lineage. However, the narrative structure does not move from present to past to present again. Eva’s memories are fragmented and events are not given any logical connection or linearity. After describing her parents’ relationship, she moves to a memory of entering the deportation trains, and then back to the liberated camp where her disoriented perspective ironically gains more focus.

But rather than think about her future, Eva cannot let her mind detach from the present environment and the past. Like Hugo, she finds order, comfort, and structure in her circumstances. After liberation, she is free to move about as she pleases, and she finds herself pacing the barb-wired boundaries of the camp. She is “appalled to realize that [she is] comfortable being confined” (22). She is “free to trespass to the other side, to saunter out there through the gate and bolt in any direction” she chooses, but “looking at life through this fence” suits her better (22). She spends many afternoons “out in the open” but “close to the fence” (29). Other days, she refuses to leave the barracks, alone with her memories and fantasies. She finally realizes she has “created a prison” for herself, “locked [herself] in this hut among ghosts of strangers” (29). She

stares out of the windows separated from the world outside, just as she sits at the barb-wire fence to look at what exists beyond. Boundaries help Eva to circumscribe her sense of self and separate her from what is foreign and unknown. Without that split between inside and outside, self and Other, Eva would be completely lost.

Interjected within Eva's story is a third thread of narrative, one that appears completely unrelated to Eva's except for the fact that it concerns Jews. The year of this narrative is 1480 in Portobuffole, Italy, near Venice. The women of this town await their husbands' return from war with the Turks. The plague had ceased after raging for a year, yet "the old suspicion of strangers remained" (48). The Jews in Portobuffole have been chased out of Germany because fears of the plague were projected on to them, and even though they have been in the Republic of Venice for a hundred years, they "arrived as foreigners, and foreigners they remained" (51). This section of the novel focuses only on the strangeness of the Jews, their dress, diet, and rituals. Before we are given any idea of the conflict these Venetian Jews will encounter, Phillips' novel returns to Eva's plot.

Eva's plot continues during her period of hiding (exactly where we are not told) with her parents before the internment camp. This time Eva is "forbidden to venture out [of her room] into the small apartment," and she submits to her "voluntary captivity" (60) every day until her parents return from foraging for food outside. Just as when Eva looks beyond the barb-wired boundary of the camp, she looks out the window to the street below. Even before she was in hiding and went to school, Eva "always sat near the window" for she "liked to look outside" (90). The narrative jumps forward and back again, giving her experience a fragmented effect, illuminating her inability to comprehend reality as unified.

The narrative returns to Portobuffole and the "blood libel," the accusation that Jews sacrifice Christian children for their blood on Passover. This section is short, and it only retells communications between the *Council of Ten* and the *Grand Council* as they struggle between the desire to punish the Jews and their need to have the Jews within their economy (only Jews were money lenders). Phillips quickly moves the narrative to Venice at a different time, when Othello is asked by the Venetians to be a General in the battle over Cyprus. Phillips' version of the Othello story barely touches upon the Jewish question, but the nature of racial and ethnic identity as well as the themes of xenophobia and racial purity emerge. It parallels the story of Jewish Otherness and illustrates the dynamic of strangeness and boundaries in the construction of identity.

Othello tells his own story, and his first statement is, “I am a foreigner” (106). However, unlike any character discussed thus far, he comes from the outside the culture with a determination to inhabit the inside:

I had moved from the edge of the world to the centre. From the dark margins to a place where even the weakest rays of the evening sun were caught and thrown back in a blaze of glory. I, a man born of royal blood, a mighty warrior, yet a man who, at one time, could view himself only as a poor slave, had been summoned to serve this state; to lead the Venetian army; to stand at the very centre of the empire. (107)

Phillips’ revision of the Othello story focuses on Othello’s subjective response to his circumstances as he moves through a culture that is utterly different from what is familiar to him. Unlike the citizens of Portobuffole and Germany, the strangeness that he is surrounded by does not cause terror or fear—instead it entices his curiosity and pulls him closer. Moving from the “dark margins” to the “very centre of the empire” shifts his sense of self by breaking down the boundaries that have previously separated him. Unlike Eva and Baumgartner, he is able to penetrate boundaries, to move from inside and out without obstruction.

However alienated and isolated he may be within Venetian culture, Othello attempts to assimilate by literally changing his appearance. He acquires “a new costume in order that [he] might dress [him]self according to the Venetian fashion, as opposed to that of [his] native country.” Like Baumgartner, Othello views Venice as cosmopolitan, where “strangers from various exotic corners of the known world had ...chose to reside” (119). He wonders if his “new costume might convince some among these Venetians to look upon [him] with a kinder eye” for more than anything he had a “desire to be accepted” (122). Othello desires to be the ideal cosmopolite and contemplates ways in which he can become reconciled with the Venetian, “if a marriage of the finest of [his] own customs with their Venetian refinement might not ...produce a more sophisticated man.” He envisions himself as a hybrid being, where the greatest qualities of both worlds might bring out the ideal. He also feels “such a conjunction of traditions might at least subdue a portion of the ill-feeling to which [his] natural state seemed to give rise” (120). Always the outsider, unassimilated and unintegrated, Othello is unlike Eva and Baumgartner in that he desires to merge with the world around him, acknowledging that it was “the desire to be accepted that was knotting [his] stomach and depriving [him] of sleep” (122).

In his isolated state, he takes to wandering “the cold, dark streets” since it had “long been [his] custom to explore the strange regions” of Venice (120). The night after he first meets the Venetian senator’s daughter, Desdemona, he is disturbed by her beauty

and sense of isolation. During this night's ramblings around Venice, he finds himself at "the place the money lenders resided" (129). This "strange place" is a "walled ghetto," where Venetian Jews are locked inside from sunset to sunrise, enclosed in "one defenseless pen" (129). Othello desires to cross into this bounded space, and he is admitted by the guards to walk the dark streets inside by himself. Literally and metaphorically Othello is allowed movement through both worlds, inside and outside of the ghetto; he is both Venetian and Jew, and yet he is neither.

He explores the inner space behind the wall and notices the lack of logic in its layout. The streets "were recklessly narrow and ill-arranged," where "well-appointed houses sat next to equally tall hovels" (130). In the quiet of night he wanders a space that reminds him of a "village that had been quickly abandoned in a time of plague" (130). He continues "to wander," like the Jew himself, and the further he enters the "filthier the alleyways became, and the more oppressive these tall hovels appeared," and the more "squalor" and "darkness and filth" obscure his way. He feels "hopelessly lost" in this environment and fears he won't be able to find his way. Why a Jew would choose to live this way "defeated [his] understanding" (130). However, Othello finds himself returning to the Jewish ghetto a second time because he feels a Jew is the only one who can mediate the differences between Desdemona and himself. During this visit to the ghetto Othello "encounters a weather-beaten, warp-faced Jew toiling over a book in semi-darkness" (141). The Jew translates Desdemona's Italian script for him, writes a response for Othello, and then delivers the letter for him. Yet, Othello does not recognize himself in the Jew and this perhaps might be his fatal flaw, his inability to see the Other in himself.

Othello's narrative is juxtaposed against Eva's, and the contrast between the two is acute: Othello desires to assimilate and become integrated into Venetian culture, while Eva's narrative continues to resist unification. Her narrative splits, and narratologically it is an astute representation of her psychological disassociation. As the only Jewish character to tell her own story, Eva's narrative also embodies the ambivalent, fluid, unstable nature of all identities. Betrayed by the British soldier Gerry who liberated her, Eva is hospitalised in Britain and decides to stop using language (perhaps knowing that language fails to make connections). Yet, in this silence the reader is privy to Eva's perceptions of the world. She describes herself in third person: "She followed me across the water [from Germany to Britain]. In fact, she follows me everywhere. ...This was to be a new land, a new beginning. I didn't want her to follow me her. ...But when we arrived, there she was, dressed in those same rags, standing behind me" (196). Her detachment is mimicked in the narrative itself—fragmented, detached, and apparently

lacking unity. Phillips creates a frenzy of discourses that bring with them an attempt to create meaning.

The last fourth of the novel, though completing the strands of story previously discussed, disrupts the sense of linearity further by the introduction of fragments of unknown narratives: dictionary definitions, medical discourse, literary criticism, new, unknown speaking voices, and the introduction of the Ethiopian Jewess Malka. We also return to Stephan's narrative that began the novel, though now it is decades later and written in third person. The narrative fragments and splinters with a kind of centrifugal force that spins everything into an open ending. Though the three major narratives come to a conclusion—Eva commits suicide, the Portobuffolo Jews are hung, and Othello marries Desdemona—the novel as a whole does not. The introduction of Malka complicates any sense of closure we might have; she is a black Jewess, a stranger and alien to Israel and its Zionist definitions.

Malka is described through a third person narrative that is subordinated with parenthesis. It begins with her displacement and explains the exit from her village home in Ethiopia. Here, Eva's decentred narrative gives way to the Malka's, yet it is reminiscent of Eva's train ride to the extermination camp:

(Together with my parents and my brother and sister. ...We lived as farmers and weavers. ...And then you herded us on to buses. ...We had never been on such a thing as a bus. And yes, it was frightening. ...People looked around. Not everybody was here. ...Relatives were being abandoned. ...It is true, many people were dying.) (199)

Initially Malka's narration is disconcerting; it is difficult to know who is speaking and how to place the voice within the already thickly textured narrative. It is only after Stephan meets Malka in a club that the reader begins to piece together this final, fragmented voice. The narrative that describes Malka's and Stephan's encounter is rather mundane, and it ends with their spending the night together and Malka's disappearance in the morning. What is most profound about this section is what is not said and what we as readers know, that as Jews they both arrived in Israel to find a home. However, in terms of race and gender, Malka is Other to Stephan. Like the repetition of history alluded to in *Baumgartner's Bombay*, Phillips' novel addresses the concentric circles of Otherness in culture. For Phillips' characters, including Othello, hybrid and cosmopolitan identities are ultimately impossible. The novel itself, the ways the stories of the characters are told, demonstrates how ambivalent and unstable identity, or our interpretation of it, can be.

Using the Jew to represent the formation of ethnic identity, both *Baumgartner's Bombay* and *The Nature of Blood* point toward the possibility of decentred and hybrid

constructions. The novels explore the conflicts and complications of identities based on nationalism, race, language, and religion. It is not that Desai and Phillips are inauthentic in their uses of the Jew. Instead, they move beyond their postcolonial identities to use the figure of the Jew as a metaphor for the process of defining and understanding oneself in a world of difference, where authenticity is undermined by concepts of inside and outside, boundaries and circumvention, and is enacted through narrative strategies of juxtaposition, flashback, and mimicry. The Jewish protagonists are paradoxically enclosed or entrapped by the groups they are a part of, while simultaneously evading or bypassing those very boundaries. They are strangers within their societies as well as exiles and wanderers. Desai and Phillips demonstrate that the Jew is not alone in his decentred and ambivalent position; the authors create a postcolonial Jew, a figure whose supreme function is to model the hybrid and fluid self, and who ultimately makes the cosmopolitan and transnational identity possible.

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<sup>1</sup> Ledent addresses Hilary Mantel's review, "Black is Not Jewish," specifically. She finds it ironic that Mantel's criticism would enact one of the main themes of the novel, "the fact that throughout history humans have felt the need to define themselves by defining others" (122).

<sup>2</sup> In a conversation with Corinne Demas Bliss, Desai responds to some of her critics: "I've already had some readers react angrily by saying I've simply fed the myth of the passive Jew who walked willingly into internment camps, a willing victim of Hitlerism. In defense I can only say that Hugo is not a representative of the Jewish race to me but the human race, of displaced and dispossessed people and tribes all over the world" (523). Axel Stähler cites Desai's comment upon receiving the Harold U. Ribalow Prize from *Hadassah Magazine*: "A prize is welcome and wonderful news at any time but this one pleases me particularly because it clears me of an accusation, made by a critic of the book, that I had 'appropriated' material that was not mine" (76).

<sup>3</sup> This essay was submitted to *Synthesis* before the publication of Isabelle Hesse's detailed and convincing essay, "Colonizing Jewishness? Minority, exile, and belonging in Anita Desai's *Baumgartner's Bombay* and Caryl Phillips's *The Nature of Blood*." Her essay is more directly concerned with the frameworks of Jewish and postcolonial studies, and she argues that "the Jew as a minority is the most provocative framework for comparisons with majorities that have been dispossessed and marginalized as a result of colonialism and racism" (882). My argument does not attempt or claim to bring together the methods of Jewish and postcolonial studies, but focuses more theoretically on the role of narrative in creating the unstable ethnic identities of both novels.

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