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Jewish-Indian Transcultural Encounters in the
Mid-Twentieth Century

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Abstract

This dissertation focuses on literary writings by and about European Jewish refugees in India and Indo-Jewish transcultural exchanges in the mid-twentieth century. To trace these neglected, often transformative exchanges between Jews and Indians, the project adopts a literary approach drawing on exile studies, postcolonial studies and memory studies. These texts bear witness to genocidal violence, exile, and consequent shifts in national identities. Through an exploration of intellectual exchanges, memoir, and fiction, this case study in multidirectional memory (Rothberg 2009) reveals new connections and constellations between European Jewish culture and the founding decades of modern India.

By considering fictional and non-fictional accounts of Jewish-Indian transcultural encounters, this project addresses the gap between cultural representations of Jewish refugee history and the founding decades of decolonised India. Presenting an alternative history against the grand narrative of British colonial history, this project complicates the India/Britain binary, adding a multicultural perspective to our understanding of modern India. It traces the way in which India, and Indians, are inscribed in the Jewish refugee experience and vice-versa. The project seeks to do justice to this unexplored chapter in cultural history, exploring interconnections between two global cultures. The project explores whether it is possible to align the discourse of Jewish affliction during and after the Holocaust with postcolonial studies in terms of the Indian context, as suggested by Aamir Mufti (*The Jewish Question and Postcolonialism*, 2007). I will consider the link between antisemitism and colonialism and examine how these two very different histories can be remembered in a dialogic process.

The approach draws on Rothberg's concept of 'multidirectional memory': making comparisons and connections between different histories of oppression in order to 'provide the grounds for new forms of collectivity.' Tracing dialogues across borders, this project uncovers new forms of Indian-Jewish solidarity. This will build on the work of Aimé Césaire and Bryan Cheyette, making connections between Jewish studies and postcolonial studies. Moving between Indian and Jewish perspectives enables the project to reflect on historical connectedness across race, gender and class. As such, the case studies outlined here have the potential to inform current debates on decolonising the curriculum, particularly within Jewish Studies and de-Europeanizing Holocaust studies.

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Author's Declaration

I am aware of and understand the University's policy on plagiarism and I certify that this thesis is my own work, except where indicated by referencing, and that I have followed good academic practices set by the University.

Abbreviations

BB Anita Desai, *Baumgartner's Bombay*

R Vishram Bedekar, *Ranaangan*

ST Alex Aronson, *Seeds of Time*

BCT Alex Aronson, *Brief Chronicles of the Time*

Introduction

This thesis focuses on a neglected chapter in the wider history of Jewish life in India: that of the Jewish refugees who escaped from Europe to settle in India in the 1930s/40s. In particular, it examines transnational encounters between Indians and European Jews around this time through an examination of the literature that focuses on this period. Existing records show that around two thousand European Jewish refugees arrived in India during the Second World War, including well-known screenwriter Willy Haas and author Alex Aronson. These relationships unfolded not only in India itself, but also in Europe and during the course of sea voyages from the West to the East.

This thesis asks: to what extent can we observe resonances between Jewish exile identities and postcolonial identities within literary works? It also inquires how these disparate cultures met, clashed, and grappled with each other in a time of global disorder and chaos. These encounters took place against a background of historic violence, which raises the question of possible affinities between the European Genocide and the socio-political crisis of Indian partition. As Jacqueline Rose observes, these questions provide ‘the offspring of the Jewish question in Europe- for India...’¹ In this way, the project strengthens partnerships between different histories of trauma.

The three primary objectives of this thesis are:

- 1) to locate a sense of historical connectedness between Indians and Jews;
- 2) to include India in the ambit of Jewish Exile Studies;
- 3) to take Holocaust Studies beyond Europe and America.

Expanding on the idea of multidirectional memory (Michael Rothberg, 2009) which aims to establish solidarity between different identity groups, Indo-Jewish literary encounters are central to the project. The following chapters in this thesis will analyse those encounters as witnessed in works such as Alex Aronson’s *Brief Chronicles of the Time* and Anita Desai’s *Baumgartner’s Bombay*. In addition, Vishram Bedekar’s *Ranaangan* uses the trope of interracial romance to explore the nuances of Indo-Judaic relationships. As this thesis will

argue, these works are key vectors to address totalitarianism, colonialism and imperialism which in the period and its aftermath generated ‘homelessness on an unprecedented scale, rootlessness to an unprecedented depth.’² The works and authors I have chosen provide the best examples to address those concerns of home and rootedness through a close examination of the intersections of politics, place, identity and trauma and its impact in this key period of history.

Colonialism and the Holocaust

In the essay ‘We Refugees’, first published in *The Menorah Journal* in 1943 when the Holocaust was tearing European Jewry apart, Hannah Arendt had the foresight to remark, ‘For the first time Jewish history is not separate but tied up with all other nations.’³ It is rather dismal that the genocide which murdered six million Jews in Europe and left many more displaced and exiled across the globe served as a mediating link between the Jewish question and global history. While physical acts of violence towards Jews were largely confined within the borders of Europe, the immigration of a large section of the persecuted European Jewry took the Holocaust beyond the immediate geography of Nazi death camps and ghettos. The transnationalization of the Holocaust gathered momentum in academia from the late twentieth century when refugee narratives from different continents (Alex Aronson’s *Brief Chronicles of the Time*, Ernest G. Heppner’s *Shanghai Refuge* to name a few) began to come into the foreground and rigorous scholarly research started to delve deeper into the lived experiences of those in exile outside Europe. Works such as *Jewish Exile in India* (edited by Johannes H. Voigt and Anil Bhatti, 1999) and *Voices from Shanghai* (edited by Irene Eber et al, 2008) are just a couple of the works that triggered the on-going process of de-Europeanizing the Shoah. Likewise, this also helped shape new understandings of who we consider to be a ‘Holocaust survivor’ to include refugees.

Indeed, the issue of whether we consider refugees who escaped Nazism as ‘survivors’ has been a subject of some consideration. As the definition provided by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum suggests, the term ‘Holocaust survivor’ has been expanded to include ‘refugees’ and ‘those in hiding’ alongside ‘those who were in concentration camps, killing centers, ghettos, and prisons...’ between 1933 and 1945⁴. Although the refugees did not experience Nazi atrocities in the same ways a camp survivor did, the consequences of forced displacement in a time of global political upheaval were financially and emotionally

detrimental. The refugees also underwent the trauma of bereavement which was transmitted to subsequent generations. The process of acquiring visas for immigration purposes and settling in distant foreign lands posed its own formidable challenges. Moreover, most of the countries these refugees emigrated to were undergoing various types of national identity trans/formations or were under threat of foreign invasion. The transition from the colonial to the postcolonial had already commenced in British overseas territories and in different nations in Asia and Africa in the 1930s. Even Britain was anticipating invasion by the Axis forces. Against the backdrop of shifts in national identities and political violence and oppression, these refugees bore witness to a complex amalgam of genocide, exile, diaspora, invasion and modern nation-building in everyday life.

With the arrival of refugees from Nazi-ravaged-Europe, the historical scope of colonized territories like India was widened to incorporate the ripples of a genocide that took place outside their immediate vicinity. In the life stories of these refugees, colonial history intersects with the history of the Holocaust. Although the stories of these immigrants are often neglected, they build an important bridge between two of the most important scholarly disciplines to combat imperialistic and fascist orientations: namely, Holocaust studies and postcolonial studies. It is through these refugees that strands of history and memory of the Holocaust become interwoven with the history of colonialism and imperialism, resulting in a productive exchange between two diverse communities. Even though these groups inarguably retain the uniqueness of their persecution to a considerable extent, their intersection opens up many avenues to initiate and sustain new forms of solidarity. The widely-held traditional view that the memories of the Holocaust are solely contained within a particular people is challenged by these refugees who bring with them the encumbrances of historical trauma to the country of their refuge, interweaving their narrative with the narrative of their host nations.

Arguably, the parallel histories of the Holocaust and European colonialism – which in the Americas and in some African colonies also involved crimes of genocide – stem from the common human inclination to deny and denounce the other. This suggests that a parallel reading of imperialism and fascism is worthwhile. The main comparison that I make in the three chapters is between the persecution of Jews in Europe and the ethnic violence of Indian Partition, which was one of the many results of colonial rule in India. My thesis is concerned with the intersection of three very different histories of violence:

- (1) imperialism and colonialism
- (2) the Nazi Genocide
- (3) Indian violence of the twentieth century

While all three of these historical episodes are radically different, they have certain mechanisms or rather, structural affinities (for example, the idea of a racial hierarchy and the demonization of others) in common. Although it is indeed a very problematic exercise to engage with different histories in tandem, establishing what Michael Rothberg terms ‘differentiated solidarity’ in his book *The Implicated Subjects* is a productive way to engage dialogically with these diversities. According to Rothberg, ‘differentiated solidarity’ stands for ‘the ability to recognize differences in history, experience, and social positioning, while still working together for a common cause.’⁵ Critics such as Rothberg, Hannah Arendt, Aimé Césaire and Bryan Cheyette have explored the possibility of identifying connections and constellations between these catastrophes.

The connection between European colonial discourse and European fascism is explored by Hannah Arendt in her book *Origins of Totalitarianism*. Near the beginning of the chapter titled ‘The Political Emancipation of the Bourgeoisie’, Arendt considers European imperialistic developments in Africa and Asia between 1884 and 1914 to be crucial in the understanding of European fascism. For Arendt, the era of imperialism imparted some of its constituent elements to the phenomenal rise of totalitarianism. She remarks, ‘... it may be justifiable to consider the whole period a preparatory stage for coming catastrophes’ and held it responsible, to a great extent, for the ‘break in the continuous flow of Western history.’⁶ Race was one of the common denominators to have dominated the malpractices of both imperialism and totalitarianism. Racism was weaponized in the colonial and imperial practices, policies and politics propelled by Darwinism and Social Darwinism. Arendt argues the colonial encounters between the whites and the Blacks in Africa bifurcated the idea of what is essentially ‘human’ into the two categories of natural and civilized.⁷ There were two primary reasons operating behind this split. On one hand, the white men refused to identify with the natives of Africa and were averse to considering themselves a part of the same species as the Africans. On the other hand, the Blacks refused to give up their identity as human beings. The conflict led to the creation of the natural/civilized binary. The whites considered themselves ‘more human’ than the Blacks who, according to them, were inevitably closer to the nature (therefore the term ‘natural’). This self-proclaimed racial

supremacy of the white Christian West reduced the racialised other to ‘human animals’. The same racial ideology was transposed to the centre from the margin by totalitarian rule. The horror and violence in Nazi concentration camps transformed ‘civilized’ human beings ‘into specimens of human animal’,⁸ the type the West had already witnessed in Africa.

Aimé Césaire was one of the first Black intellectuals to draw parallels between the Nazi Genocide in Europe and the crimes of European colonialism in his revolutionary book *Discourse on Colonialism* (1955). First published as an essay in 1950, five years after the end of Second World War, the book launches an audaciously scathing attack on colonial discourse and enunciates its damaging impact on both the colonized and the colonizer. Césaire, renowned for his contributions towards anti-colonial polemics and the Négritude movement, locates the root of all evils associated with European modernity in its diverse colonial practices. In his introduction to *Discourse* titled ‘A Poetics of Anticolonialism’, Robin D.G. Kelley remarks, ‘... its [*Discourse*’s] recasting of the history of Western Civilization helps us locate the origins of fascism within colonialism itself...’.⁹ Césaire’s pronouncements primarily revolve around his contention that the colonial enterprises ‘decivilize’ the colonizer by unbridled acts of malevolence unleashed in the form of torture, rape, plunder and massacre. These practices, according to Césaire, directly resulted in the shattering of the self-professed superiority of the European race and its subsequent degeneration. The race crimes exhibited at the periphery by the master race moved from the margins to the centre and shoved their own continent in the bottomless pits of barbarity. What ensued in a rapid succession of events is the rise of fascism in Europe. In a long sentence Césaire contends,

... before they (Europeans) were its (Nazism’s) victims, they were its accomplices; that they tolerated that Nazism before it was inflicted on them, that they absolved it, shut their eyes to it, legitimized it, because, until then, it had been applied only to non-European peoples; that they have cultivated that Nazism, that they are responsible for it, and that before engulfing the whole edifice of Western, Christian civilization in its reddened waters, it oozes, seeps and trickles from every crack.¹⁰

Keeping in line with his Marxist inclinations, Césaire further proclaims that the twentieth century Christian bourgeoisie in Europe was a key in the making of Hitler and the very core of it upholds a characteristically similar stance towards its non-European other. The reason

why the West deems Hitler reprehensible is the fact that he brought its barbarity home; he directed its stream of violence inwards. Césaire argues, ‘...it is the crime against white man...the fact that he (Hitler) applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the “coolies” of India, and the “niggers” of Africa’ is what rendered him ‘unforgivable’.¹¹ It is interesting to note here that Hitler’s application of ‘colonial procedures’ was aimed not at just any ‘white man’, or simply put, what constituted the ‘self’ of Europe, but at its minorities, at the others within its civilization which included Slavic people, communists, gay people, disabled people, Romani and Sinti people. Similar to European colonialism, the primary objective of European fascism was the negation of the other with minimum disruptions to the interest of the self.

However, a parallel reading of these histories is a task to be undertaken with caution, which requires looking beyond the existing competitiveness for victimhood while simultaneously avoiding the merging of two histories for the sake of universalizing their sufferings. The articulation of Holocaust memory in the public sphere has often been accused of drawing attention away from the memories of colonialism in the global north by scholars like Walter Benn Michaels.¹² On the other hand, in European colonies, particularly those which had also incorporated Jewish refugees from Nazi Europe, memories of a dark colonial past overshadow the memories of the Holocaust. To counter this general tendency of competition, Rothberg calls for a process of productively engaging with memories of diverse historical atrocities which he terms ‘multidirectional memory’. Rothberg is of the view that, ‘Shared histories of racism, spatial segregation, genocide... provide the new grounds for collectivity.’¹³ From another point of view, dwindling the uniqueness of these historical oppressions will, in Bryan Cheyette’s words, ‘lead to vacuity.’¹⁴ And yet, Cheyette appears to align with Rothberg’s position that recognizes how ‘mutual affinities’ between antisemitic, totalitarian history and colonial history have the potential to transcend ‘insular histories of victimization and adopt a more open-minded sense of historical connectedness.’¹⁵ After all, in both imperial and totalitarian politics, the root of all violence and oppression lay in the common European propensity for demonising the other.

Two categories come to mind while reflecting on Europe’s racial others: internal and external. The non-Christian segment of Europe, mainly Jews, Romani people, and Muslims in the Balkans formed its internal other while its global colonized subjects were subsumed in the category of its external other. The refugees who escaped the Holocaust inevitably fall into the category of Europe’s internal other. Among them, those who sought refuge in colonized

territories in Asia and Africa encountered Europe's external other—the natives of those regions. Records of encounters between the Jewish refugees and European colonized peoples in cultural productions testify how their disparate cultures met, clashed, and grappled with each other. The pain of colonial subjugation encountered the trauma of exile. Thus European colonies became important sites where two very different forms of oppression, culture, and community collided, competed, and sometimes even coalesced in the volatile social, cultural, and political milieu.

Reading these histories side by side not only builds new forms solidarity with due recognition of their distinctions, but also helps shed light on the multidirectional violence of the modern states' self-fashioning. In *Enlightenment in the Colony*, Aamir R. Mufti explores the minority question in modern postcolonial India under the light of Jewish affliction in the West. Identifying the Jew as a universal figural victim of minoritization, Mufti underscores affinities between the Jewish question in Europe and minorities in India in the aftermath of the colonial rule in the sub-continent. Alluding to the theoretical attempts solidifying crossings between 'colonial and Jewish experience'¹⁶, Mufti writes, 'My overall purpose in this context is to contribute to the ongoing effort to explore the possibilities for the convergence of perspectives made possible by the problematic of "Jewish difference" with those emerging out of the forms of difference that mark the trajectories of colonial and postcolonial cultures and societies.'¹⁷ Following Mufti, analysing the nuances of these experiences helps us decipher the interplay between different identity groups and problematize the dynamic relation between the conditions of power and powerlessness.

Exile Studies

Another way to analyse Indo-Jewish cultural encounters is through a consideration of 'exile' as a concept that adds nuance to the way Indian culture is often analysed. In the essay 'DissemiNation', Homi Bhabha deconstructs the idea of nation as a 'holistic cultural entity'¹⁸ which is intrinsically homogeneous. Modern India's national character, marked by multiculturalism and heterogeneity, exemplifies Bhabha's position in this regard. Indo-Jewish cultural encounters during the mid-twentieth century in India present an alternative history against the grand narrative of British colonial history. The articulation of this alternative and largely unexplored chapter helps transcend the Indian/Britain binary, and adds a multicultural perspective to our understanding of modern India. The community of European Jewish

refugees formed one of the minority groups in India causing what Bhabha calls the internal split of ‘horizontal’ national identity. The nation therefore, transforms into ‘a liminal signifying space that is internally marked by the discourse of minorities.’¹⁹ On the one hand, the influx of Jewish refugees led to productive outcomes in the Indian cultural sphere. On the other hand, the experience of exile in India shaped subsequent literary and cultural endeavours of many of these refugees. Yana Meerzon’s belief that the condition of exile can potentially go beyond the state of ‘mourning, depression, disbelief, and constant suffering’²⁰ to kindle creative and artistic excellence is evidenced in the works of authors Alex Aronson and Ruth Praver Jhabvala.

In the book *Outlandish*, Nico Israel sets out to investigate the implications of writing as an ‘apparent cultural outsider’, and the literary representation of an outlander’s subject position.²¹ The primary texts analysed in this project can be categorised as literature of displacement either written by a displaced author or written about displaced individuals in a new land. Drawing upon Benedict Anderson’s conceptualization of nation as an ‘imagined community’, Israel asks the question: ‘... does writing of displacement present a case of imagined alterity...?’²² Outsiders see things differently, and often an outsider’s perspective can deliver valuable lessons for mainstream society.

One of the predominant narratives of mid-twentieth century India was the discourse of virulent, chauvinistic nationalism. As in Alex Aronson’s pronouncement vis-à-vis his subject position in India— ‘an alien among the rulers as well as the ruled’²³— the Jewish refugees who had arrived in India did not fit into the framework of Hegelian master-slave dialectic in terms of the British-Indian binary. A complete integration into the ‘imagined community’ of India was, therefore, a difficult task for these refugees. Adapting to the Indian way of life was another challenge. In the essay ‘Myself in India’ Ruth Praver Jhabvala states, ‘The place [India] is very strong and often proves too strong for European nerves.’²⁴ So, the exiled identities of the Jewish refugee not only unfolded in their day-to-day negotiations with the social, political and cultural milieu of India but also with their complicated sense of belonging and non-belonging in the subcontinent.

That exile can proffer opportunities in both individual and artistic growth is strongly argued by Yana Meerzon in *Performing Exile, Performing Self*. For Meerzon, the complex nature of exilic condition has two sides to it. On one hand, exilic state inflicts ‘humiliation and challenge’ upon the exiled; on the other hand, it can provide the prospect of ‘dignity and...

success.²⁵ While she acknowledges that refugee success stories are far outweighed by the sheer scale of immigration of modern times, she points at the public admiration towards these exiled individuals (her analysis revolves around Joseph Brodsky, Derek Walcott et al.) in both their countries of refuge and in their homelands. Meerzon also foregrounds the life-saving and life-affirming qualities of exile. It is a 'solution' to 'a perceived threat' in the form of 'confinement, civil war, poverty, ethnic discrimination, or physical or psychological persecution.'²⁶ Both the positive and negative connotations of exile discussed above were true for the Jewish refugees who had arrived in India in the mid-twentieth century. The question that this project seeks to answer is: To what extent does the experience of Jewish refugees in India transform our understanding of cultural transmission in the twentieth century? Which new insights does it yield?

Over the centuries, Jewish identity has come to be perceived as one of the most prominent markers of forced displacement, exilic condition and diaspora. Alvin Rosenfeld remarks, 'It is little wonder, then, that the Jew... has been adopted as the paradigmatic emblem of exile.'²⁷ For centuries, the very essence of Jewish exile has been understood as a state imbued with relentless negativities, and often, rightly so. The exilic experience unfolds as the exile navigates the pain of detachment from the homeland and with the difficulty of reconstructing life and identity in a foreign land. The conceptualization and the practice of exile originated in ancient Greece as a means of safeguarding the rights and freedom of its citizens from despotic rulers. The sentence of exile entailed the banishment of 'the tyrant from the community.'²⁸ It was also often used as a form of punishment for political dissidents like the Roman poet Ovid. Meerzon considers the act of political exile still to be 'the most powerful paradigm of physical, spatial and temporal separation from one's native land.'²⁹

Interestingly, the Nazi regime in Europe reversed the dynamics of the original intent of 'political exile', leaving its Jewish citizens, among others, vulnerable before Hitler's tyranny. As a result, a large section of European Jewry was displaced and exiled. In the essay 'Reflections on Exile', Edward Said subscribes to the conventional view of exile as a state of overwhelming desolation, loneliness, and agony. For him, the condition of exile denotes a 'terminal loss' the 'essential sadness' of which 'can never be surmounted.'³⁰ He goes further to proclaim that exile is tantamount to death. Yet, Jewish life in exile in the mid-twentieth century can also be thought of as a rebirth, as a new life after a tragic death, as securing a second chance at living because of the horrifying pre-exilic conditions. Exile had numerous possibilities for refugees. Amidst the attempts at rebuilding the self and coming to terms with

an altered identity remained the seeds of reclaiming human rights, improving the quality of life, and regaining lost social status. Furthermore, life in exile often permitted unfettered exploration and expression of creativity. Tinged and whetted by the experience of exile, pre-existing artistic aptitude found expression in remarkable cultural productions which not only contribute to the aesthetic and artistic sphere of the host nation, but also serve as important historical documents to decipher the relationship between the refugees and the country of refuge.

The concepts of migration, exile and refugee are interconnected in a post-Holocaust, globalized reality. Identifying them as some of the fundamental conditions of modernity and taking into account their concurrent presence in everyday life are important tasks for critics of contemporary cultural productions. As Homi Bhabha aptly suggests, ‘Where, once, the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of a world literature, perhaps now we can suggest the transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees... may be the terrains of world literature.’³¹ One of the aims of this project is to move beyond the realm of regional and national to the transnational. To achieve this, it is imperative to trace points of connectedness and disconnectedness between Jewish immigrant/exile identity and experience with postcolonial identity and experience.

Organisation

In Chapter 1, I provide a critical reading of Anita Desai’s *Baumgartner’s Bombay* (1988) drawing upon Michael Rothberg’s concept of multidirectional memory and Aamir R. Mufti’s *Enlightenment in the Colony*. An intriguing case study in transnational memory, Anita Desai’s *Baumgartner’s Bombay* presents the story of the eponymous hero, Hugo Baumgartner who has been subjected to eternal isolation and exclusion, first as a German Jew in Nazi Germany, and later, as a ‘White Firanghi’ in India. Baumgartner leaves Berlin amidst the growing fear of Nazism and relocates to colonial India where at first, he is forced into confinement in an internment camp as an ‘enemy alien’, then exposed to the violence and bloodshed of the Indian partition, and is eventually murdered by a German drug addict in Bombay. Through Baumgartner’s repeated exposures to different histories of violence, the novel makes connections between antisemitism and colonialism, thus allowing for a reading employing the multidirectional model of memory as propounded by Michael Rothberg, and drawing parallels between the minority questions in Europe and India.

In Chapter 2, I analyse *Ranaangan* (1939) by Vishram Bedekar (translated in English as *Battlefield* by Jerry Pinto). The only novel from Bedekar's oeuvre, *Ranaangan* uses the trope of interracial romance and friendship to compare and contrast Indian and Jewish experiences in the mid-twentieth century. Originally written in Marathi, the fast-paced narrative of the novel resonates with the chaotic, rapidly-changing historical period it is set in- the final days leading to WW2. Chakradhar Vidhwans embarks on a homebound ship at Genoa and beholding the Jewish refugees on the deck, he asks, '... this ordinary Jew standing in front of me. What was his crime?' (R) Chakradhar eventually falls in love with one of these refugees, Herta von Hinne. While Chakradhar is returning home in Maharashtra after his two years' sojourn in Europe, Herta, ousted from Berlin by the Nazis, is on her quest to find a new home in Shanghai. The novel rightly shows that albeit the immediate differences in their respective circumstances and destinations, both Chakradhar and Herta are both victims of European racial prejudice, and it is precisely this shared experience which brings them together.

In chapter 3 of this thesis, my study revolves around the close reading of *Brief Chronicles of the Time* (1990) by Alex Aronson, a German Jewish refugee who arrived in India in 1937. In this memoir, Aronson inscribes his experiences of exile in the then undivided Bengal, where he lived and worked from 1937 to 1946 to escape Nazi persecution. The significance of Aronson's memoir lies in the fact that it is one of the very few accounts on the Jewish refugee life in India written by a refugee himself, offering a first-hand documentation of the 'other' side of the story. That Santiniketan offered Aronson 'a shelter from chaos and disintegration' is evident from his repetitive use of the phrase 'abode of peace' while referring to the place. Simultaneously, the book also foregrounds the challenges Aronson faced as a Westerner in his first encounter with the East. It provides valuable insight into Aronson's interactions with Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore and filmmaker Satyajit Ray, his experience in the British internment camps, his observations on the contemporary political crises in South East Asia, and his position as an outsider in the dynamics between the ruler and the ruled. The book is an important document in the history of Indo-Jewish studies which brings India into the discourse of Jewish Exile and takes the Holocaust refugee narrative beyond Europe.

In the conclusion, I discuss the general insights I derived from analysis of these texts, and suggest potential avenues for future research in the domain of literary studies concerning Indo-Jewish transcultural encounters in the mid-twentieth century.

The three texts that I have chosen for my research—Anita Desai’s novel *Baumgartner’s Bombay*, Vishram Bedekar’s novel *Ranaangan*, and Alex Aronson’s memoir *Brief Chronicles of the Time*—simultaneously project similar and dissimilar characteristics. They are very different from each other in terms of their categorical and stylistic features: the first is an imaginative reconstruction of a Jewish refugee’s life based on real documents, the second is a somewhat semi-autobiographical novel relying heavily on fiction, and the third is a memoir. They also vary in their scope and intention with each one offering a divergent perspective on the contemporary transcultural encounters between Indians and Jewish refugees. But the similarities lie in the fact that in spite of being based on facts, all three works are essentially narratives which are in some ways removed from the actual facts either through imaginative elaboration or through time— even Aronson’s memoir was written many decades after his experience of exile. Registering the shock of totalitarianism, these three books delineate a condition of life that is imposed upon the main characters, not chosen, and show how such a condition determines the individuals’ actions, emotions, and locations permanently. The protagonists featured in these texts are cosmopolitan individuals who are searching for a home away from home, driven by the tragedy and confusion of dislodgement and dispossession. But they also cherish friendships, relationships, and acquaintances resulting solely from the experience of Jewish exile. By portraying these positive aspects of Indo-Jewish encounters, the books suggest the need to forge new partnerships across different identity groups. Finally, all three texts offer important insights into the dynamics of majority/minority relations in the modern nation-states and hint at the changing global literary scene where stories of migrants, refugees, and different episodes of historical oppression find increasing representation.

Chapter 1: Anita Desai's *Baumgartner's Bombay*

Introduction

Published in 1988, Anita Desai's *Baumgartner's Bombay* is a fictional reconstruction of the life-story of a Jewish refugee who escaped to India in the mid-twentieth century from Nazi-occupied Europe. The inspiration behind the novel's eponymous protagonist, Hugo Baumgartner, stems from this unnamed refugee whose collection of letters comes to Desai's attention through his lawyer after his demise. What piques Desai's interest in this person is the fact that some of these letters, marked with the number J673/1, were dispatched from a concentration camp in Germany, revealing epistolary exchanges between a mother held in Nazi captivity and her exiled son in India. In an interview with Feroza F. Jussawalla, Desai explains that she was preoccupied with the individual and his story and remarks how she 'felt the need to supply them with a history.'¹ Not having shared a personal connection with this refugee, Desai resorts to fiction in order to innovate 'a history for this figure whom I had seen but not known.'² What emerged out of Desai's curiosity and compulsion is the genesis of *Baumgartner's Bombay*, an ambitious literary portrayal of Jewish refugees in India in the mid-twentieth century.

What is perhaps the most intriguing part of this narrative is the way Desai represents the day to day negotiations of a Jewish refugee with life in India and the problem raised in the title, namely, the complex question of his belonging to Bombay and to India. In India, European Jewish refugee stories tend to get buried under the majoritarian historical trends of the time. The voices of these refugees often get lost in the multitude of mainstream colonial, anti-colonial and postcolonial narratives. After all, Jewish refugees arrived in India at a critical juncture in history. On the one hand, India was to gain independence from the British colonial rule just over a decade later, and the transition from the colonial to the postcolonial was already in process. On the other, India was to witness a violent communal riot between the Hindus and the Muslims ignited by a gory partition which claimed countless lives and left millions of people displaced and destitute. These huge internal political upheavals often overshadow stories of Jewish refugees' struggle to assimilate in the Indian socio-cultural framework in this era. Rarely do they make for the chief subject matter in the works of

prominent Indian postcolonial writers. Therefore, Anita Desai's handling of Jewish exile in India makes *Baumgartner's Bombay* a key text for scholars of the largely unexplored chapter of Indo-Jewish transcultural exchanges of the twentieth century. Considering Anita Desai's non-Jewish, Indo-German hybrid background, one may argue as to whether her novel can qualify as an authentic representation of contemporary Jewish struggle in India. But one cannot deprecate the value of her efforts towards a literary revival of the unique history of Jewish migration to India during the Second World War.

Anita Desai was born in 1937 to a Bengali father and a German mother in Mussorie, India. Her father, D.N. Mazumdar, went to study engineering in Berlin where he first met her mother, Toni Nime Mazumdar. The couple relocated to India before the Second World War which claimed the lives of Toni Nime's family members.³ She introduced her children to the Berlin of her past through stories and recollections. German became the spoken language in the Desai household. It might seem remarkable to feature a Holocaust refugee as the protagonist in an Indian novel, however, as Aamir R. Mufti notes, 'The figure of the Jew [...] raises questions about deracination, homelessness, abstraction, supra-national identifications, and divided loyalties.'⁴ It is precisely these questions that Desai sets out to explore in *Baumgartner's Bombay*, in part for biographical reasons, due to her own mixed background. *Baumgartner's Bombay* becomes an opportunity for Desai to embrace what Stef Craps calls 'her mother's German heritage' and explore the world her mother came from, and complex notions of belonging.⁵ The inheritance of the German language from her mother finds articulations in the nursery rhymes and children's songs that she incorporates in the text. But being a non-Jewish fiction writer who has not witnessed the extremities of the Holocaust in person, Desai wisely refrains from venturing too much into the actualities of the Shoah and the concentration camps in Europe in her novel. Rather she concentrates on a transnational aspect of the Shoah over which she had considerable authority, negating voices that challenge the credibility of non-survivors' handling of the Holocaust in fiction.⁶

Introducing a character like Hugo Baumgartner into the Indian literary landscape challenges the idea of India's homogeneous national and cultural character. Baumgartner's minority status becomes instrumental in showing the 'internal split' that Bhabha talks about within the mainstream narrative of India. Hugo's presence in India, alongside other European Jewish refugees, contributes to the country's rich multicultural identity. Debunking the myth of one nation one narrative, Desai foregrounds the plurality of the nation through the protagonist to whom 'India was two worlds, or ten.' (*BB*,99) Baumgartner serves as a mediating figure

between the Indian subcontinent and Europe amidst historical turbulences of the mid-twentieth century. When Baumgartner, as an internal other of Europe, reacts to the predicament of the West's external others- Indians- during the partition, he becomes a medium through which Indian history interacts with the history of the Holocaust.

By interweaving the trauma of the Holocaust with the trauma of exile, empire, and partition in India, Desai presents a case of 'multidirectional memory' long before Michael Rothberg's coining of the term and shows how different histories of oppression can be articulated together. Apart from this, Desai also raises a number of pertinent questions about Jewish exile identity and experience, India as a country of refuge, and the damaging impact of alienation, bereavement, and isolation on an individual. She also provides resources to discuss broader themes of belonging, deracination, and divided loyalties. Likewise, the questions that this chapter attempts to answer through this novel are:

- 1) To what extent does *Baumgartner's Bombay* shape our understanding of India as a refuge for Jewish refugees from Nazi-occupied Europe?
- 2) How does the employment of multidirectional model of memory connect the trauma of the Holocaust with that of the partition?
- 3) How does recurrent exposure to multidirectional forms of violence affect an individual and determine their actions?
- 4) In what ways does *Baumgartner's Bombay* help us compare and contrast postcolonial identities and Jewish refugee identities?

By attempting to answer these questions, I hope to find out more about how the transnational study of the Holocaust can inform our understanding of the condition of Jewish refugees across continents. In addition, I draw attention to the importance of parallel reading of different histories to establish connections and constellations between cultures. In this way, as the novel's title suggests, I investigate to what extent ethnic/religious others can truly 'belong' when being continually subjected to processes of othering.

In the introduction to *Baumgartner's Bombay*, Suketu Mehta refers to the novel as 'a chronicle of a murder foretold.'⁷ This is because the beginning of the novel gives away its end: the murder of the central character Hugo Baumgartner. The novel opens in Bombay in the late twentieth century with a shocked Lotte, processing and grieving her friend

Baumgartner's unexpected demise. Then it goes on to describe the last day of the protagonist before being murdered by Kurt, a drug addict German hippie whom he meets in a chance encounter at Cafe de Paris. The following chapters traverse back and forth between the past and the present, apprising the readers of Hugo Baumgartner's personal history — first as a young Jewish boy in Nazi Germany and then as a refugee in India —and the incidents that lead to his death.

One striking feature of the novel is its alliterative title, 'Baumgartner's Bombay'. In an interview, Desai speaks of how the plot of the novel fell into place immediately after she came up with the title. She remarks, 'The name "Baumgartner's Bombay" seemed to just fall out of the sky, once I had the title, I was able to uncover the rest and invent the story.'⁸ Jangling with the repetition of 'b' and 'm' sounds, the title instantaneously conjoins the West with the East, the self with the other, the foreign and the native, and the refugee with the place of refuge. It deceives the reader into believing Bombay belongs to Baumgartner and Baumgartner belongs to Bombay. It conveys a strong sense of attachment, inclusion and ownership. But, as the novel progresses, we find out Baumgartner neither owns Bombay, nor is he owned by Bombay; he eludes the city in the same way the city eludes him even after thirty years of association. It is a story of failed belonging and, as we read, we begin to understand the many internal and external obstacles which prevented him from belonging. Also of importance is the fact that Bombay is not the only city to be featured in the novel – Berlin, Venice and Calcutta are also described. One may then ask, why Bombay? Bombay, a proper noun, denotes a specific space, the most populous city in India. The use of Bombay in the title of the novel hints at the human tendency to associate an individual with a particular place, the key importance of location in identity formation. But what location should one assign to a figure like Baumgartner, a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany in India? The Berlin of his childhood has disowned him. Calcutta fails to provide him with a safe and thriving environment after the partition. What is left for him then is Bombay, even though it is in this city where Baumgartner is brutally murdered by a young German traveller near the end of the novel.

The novel both opens and ends in Bombay/Mumbai, which is unanimously considered to be the financial capital of India, rife with opportunities and possibilities. Much of the wealth in Bombay in the early 20th century comes from Parsis, of which the local café owner Farrokh is a representative. The Parsis are often understood to be a community that looked out towards the world and maintained relations with Europe. Perhaps for this reason, the city

ends up being welcoming of Jewish refugees, who find employment at big business firms like the Tata conglomerate. Considering the cosmopolitan background of Bombay, it seems only natural for Baumgartner to settle in this city. Yet, simultaneously, Bombay is also a city where the fear of failure is omnipresent and the stark contrast between wealth and poverty is disturbingly visible. Baumgartner can neither stand out, nor blend in here. His life in Bombay is fraught with contrasts.

Apart from providing professional opportunities and shelter, Bombay has also offered Baumgartner some moments of happiness, such as his friendships with Chimanlal, a businessman, and Lotte, a fellow German exile. The rejections and apathy he gets from his day-to-day negotiations with most people, however, is undeniable. On one hand, Farrokh provides Baumgartner with leftover food to feed his cats. On the other, the watchman of Baumgartner's apartment building looks at him with 'distaste'. (BB,6) While Chimanlal's son ruthlessly denounces him after Chimanlal's demise, the large family of cats that Baumgartner cares for in his apartment nurtures him emotionally, providing a surrogate for the family he has lost in the Holocaust. It is evident from these instances that Baumgartner occupies the interstitial space in between success and failure which is marked by the curious amalgam of attachment and detachment, companionship and loneliness, loyalty and betrayal.

Baumgartner's Berlin

The manner in which the narrative of *Baumgartner's Bombay* tightly interweaves the past with the present demonstrates how important it is to read both time frames in tandem. The epigraph of the novel, an excerpt from T.S. Eliot's poem, 'East Coker' reinforces this: 'In my beginning is my end. In succession/ Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended/ Are removed, destroyed, restored.' The cyclical nuances of time, as well as the merging of growth and destruction that the quote alludes to the need to scrutinize the past in order to gain knowledge about Baumgartner's present. The T.S. Eliot quote stresses the importance of family dynasties which must always come to end. 'House' here suggests a great family dynasty, thus endowing Baumgartner and his doomed family with a sense of nobility and tragedy. Furthermore, the circular structure of the text also indicates how deeply the past is entrenched in the present, how fundamental Baumgartner's childhood trauma in Berlin is in shaping his present sense of self, otherness, and non-belonging, and how explicitly connected his death is to Germany. Hence, it is imperative to consider Hugo Baumgartner's pre-

immigration past in Nazi-ruled Berlin before attempting an analysis of his experience as a German-Jewish refugee in India.

Moving back in time to depict the protagonist's childhood in pre-war Germany, the second chapter of the novel opens with a description of Hugo Baumgartner's father, and his weekly outings with Hugo 'through the Sunday streets' of Berlin (*BB*,27). Hugo's father, Siegfried Baumgartner, a dignified middle-aged German-Jewish businessman, has won his opulence and elevated societal status from his lucrative furniture business set in the heart of the city. His sense of agency and confidence is reflected in his controlled, upright posture, in the way he dresses himself in fine clothes and treads Berlin streets with a walking stick adorned with an 'ivory knob' (*BB*,26). On some Sundays, he takes a cheerful Hugo out for hot chocolate at the cafe, while he himself indulges in a mug of cold, bitter, and frothy beer, listening to Strauss waltzes on the street. The novel offers glimpses into the intimacy between the two seated at a table outside the cafe over the mug of beer. The father furtively slides his mug towards his son and the latter takes a quick sip of the drink which leaves a moustache of froth just above his lips, much to his father's amusement. On the way home, they exchange hats and the father sings out aloud in mirth. Shortly afterwards, Hugo's mother is introduced to the readers. She joins her husband and son on a walk down their street donning her signature black cape with violet Parma tucked in her hair.

The scene then shifts to an elaborate description of the Baumgartners' business and home in the city of Berlin. Separated by a flight of stairs, the family's apartment and business showroom exude an aura of refinement and wealth. The 'large, open, unnerving' showroom 'in which elegantly languorous *chaises-longues* in carved mahogany or consoles in blonde wood with gilded scrolls basked in the light from the floor-to-ceiling windows' is the domain of Hugo's father (*BB*,29). Here, surrounded by the dazzling grandeur of 'Empire suites', 'boudoir sets', and 'three-piece mirrors', pleasantries are exchanged, business deals are made, and economic transactions are swiftly carried out between Siegfried Baumgartner and his customers and suppliers (*BB*,29). The apartment upstairs, on the other hand, is the 'realm' of Hugo's mother albeit his father's prominent presence (*BB*,30). Although small in number, Hugo's mother's belongings reveal a 'living quality that prevented the rooms from becoming showrooms' (*BB*,31). She is represented as a compassionate and mellow woman devoted to the needs and nurture of her family and home. The rooms in the apartment are adorned with tasteful artefacts and furniture that further underscore the family's cultured background and affluence. A domestic help in the form of Berthe is employed for carrying out household

chores. Up until this point, the family of three, unruffled by their difference from the mainstream, evoke a sense of contentment and completeness, soon to be destroyed by the pre-war Nazi antisemitic measures and the Holocaust. The security and prosperity portrayed in this chapter underlines what Baumgartner is about to lose. Apart from representing the condition of a German-Jewish family in pre-Holocaust Berlin, it shows the rapid decline and disintegration of Jewish life in Germany and acts as a contrast to the life of isolation and deprivation that awaits the exiled protagonist in India.

The fall of the Baumgartners begins abruptly. The first symptom of the decline seems rather innocuous on the surface- their housekeeper Berthe does not return from her annual holiday in Harz, and in her place, Hugo is sent by his mother to fetch a portion of butter from the neighbourhood grocery shop for supper. However, on the street, when Hugo becomes increasingly aware of the all-encompassing, uncanny darkness around him, when the shrieks of a madwoman pierce through the silent evening, the narrative shifts its tone in anticipation of what is coming. From this episode onwards, the fate and fortune of the Baumgartner family witness a rapid descent. Disconcerting changes in Hugo's personality are brought to the forefront; the growing sense of his identity-crisis becomes apparent to the readers. Hugo fears his mother may fail to uphold the standards of his friends' parents; her facial features turn out to be a point of unease for him. Hugo hurls unsettling questions at his mother in regard to her appearance that reveals his difficulties to come to terms with their Jewishness. Blatantly, he asks, 'Why don't you look like the other mothers?' (*BB*,38). Furthermore, the fact that his Jewish identity sets him apart from his friends in school is a great source of mortification for Hugo. When he finds out there is no present for him at the school Christmas party, and when his teacher, upon realizing what has happened, tries to hand him a glass globe, Hugo is overpowered by an inexplicable sense of shame and self-loathing that leaves him immobile. 'What was the shame?', the novel asks (*BB*,42). 'The sense that he did not belong to the picture-book world of the fir tree, the gifts and the celebration?... Was it just that he sensed he did not belong to the radiant, the triumphant of the world? A strange sensation, surely, for a child' (*BB*,42). To answer the question, the shame stems from the immediate realization that he is an outsider who occupies the margin. Hugo is rejected by the majority which makes him an outsider in the land he is born in. Engulfed by the humiliation of being 'the only one without a Christmas gift', he dreads the thought of a return to school after the holidays, but, as fate would have it, that return never transpires (*BB*,41).

In 1933, the Third Reich introduces a set of new anti-Jewish measures to curtail the presence of Jewish students in public schools and universities in Germany. The Jewish children are segregated from the 'Aryan' pupils, and, are forced to attend Jewish schools. Hugo is also enrolled in such a Jewish school across the city where, amidst the overwhelming unfamiliarity of its warehouse-setting, new faces, and Hebrew language, he feels just as much self-conscious and alienated. Despite it being a Jewish school, Hugo is subjected to bullying and taunting of other children for not being able to assimilate. Pippa Brush is right to remark, 'He [Hugo] is doubly marginalised in Berlin: his ethnic background isolates him through the growing influence of Nazism; a strange language and the cruelty of children isolate him when he is placed in a Jewish school, making him marginal even within his own community.'⁹ At home, Hugo is pained to see his mother occupied with Berthe's chores. The apartment, once gleaming and immaculate, has now begun to lose 'its waxy gloss, its air of comfortable opulence' (BB,45). Sticks made of barley sugar replace more expensive dark chocolates. Siegfried Baumgartner's furniture business downstairs no longer thrives in the same manner and capacity. The rich Jewish customers are either unwilling to invest in furniture or are being forced to immigrate from Nazi Germany on account of increasingly aggressive antisemitic policies. The showroom gradually loses its grandeur, delivery boys and cart drivers disappear, dust piles up on the luxurious, intricately designed tables, chairs, and mirrors. The family is also ostracized by their non-Jewish neighbours and acquaintances. Hugo's sense of otherness, reinforced by his quotidian observations, starts creating an unbridgeable rift between him and Berlin.

All of these transformations eventually escalate into the Kristallnacht in 1938, the most notorious pogrom carried out against the Jewish businesses, buildings, and synagogues in pre-War Germany by the Nazis and many other German civilians. From this point on the Baumgartners are doomed. Siegfried Baumgartner's business is marked as one of the many targets of the rioters. On the first night of the attack, 'the letters JUDE [were] painted in red on the showroom window' (BB,48-49). Seeing his father standing shell-shocked in the hall, Hugo's existing sense of estrangement grows into the terror of persecution. The assault intensifies next night. Robbed of their agency to protest, the Baumgartners watch the destruction from above. Downstairs, 'Men lifted tables, commodes, *armoires*, *chaises-longues* and the mirrors off the walls: it sounded as if the house, the whole street were being evacuated' (BB,49). The Germany in which they once belonged and thrived ceases to exist overnight. Next day, the Nazis arrest and dispatch Siegfried Baumgartner to Dachau for two

weeks: ‘In that early year, it was still possible to leave Dachau’ (*BB*,50). When he returns home, Siegfried shivers uncontrollably. Shortly afterwards, he commits suicide by gassing himself. After that, one of Siegfried’s associates, a timber merchant from Hamburg who takes over the business and the apartment after his tragic death, advises Hugo and his mother to emigrate to India. While Hugo is persuaded, his mother’s deep disdain and suspicion towards Indian culture, climate, and lifestyle prevent her from seriously considering the suggestion. As a result, Hugo and his mother are separated when he embarks on his voyage to India. Eventually, his mother is detained by the Nazis and dies a few years after at a concentration camp in Germany. In this way, Nazi rule in Berlin first covertly debilitates the fabric of the Baumgartner family and discards them through official and socio-economic exclusion, and then overtly destroys them through the trauma of separation, detention, and dislocation. To a great extent, the trajectory of Baumgartner’s exiled experience in India is shaped by his exposure to multidirectional violence and abuse in Germany over which he had no agency, leaving him with no option except to emigrate.

Experience of Internment in British India

It is worth keeping in mind that when Desai was writing *Baumgartner’s Bombay*, stories of European Jewish refugees who immigrated to India were widely unknown. Sources of information on the lives of these refugees in internment camps set by the British authorities were even lesser in number. In her interview with Feroza Jussawalla, Desai confesses how she had to rely heavily upon the testimonies of former Jewish inmates and written records of Canadian and English internment camps for a realistic representation of the camp-life in India. Desai’s mother’s German background proved very useful while gleaning the oral testimonies, as many of these inmates were known personally by her mother. Alex Aronson’s experience of internment recorded in his memoir *Brief Chronicles of the Time*, which came out two years after *Baumgartner’s Bombay*, further corroborates Desai’s account of Baumgartner’s internment. Interestingly, in her interview with Jussawalla, Desai also says that she had her manuscript checked by ‘a Jewish professor in Israel who had actually been in such a camp.’¹⁰ Taking into account the parallels between her and Aronson’s descriptions of the coexistence of Nazi sympathisers and Jews in the camp, and the camp authority’s strong emphasis on tidiness, we can surmise that the Jewish professor that Desai sought help from is

none other than Professor Aronson himself. In the Vintage paperback edition, Desai credits Aronson by name at the back of the book.

The account of Baumgartner's experience in the internment camps occurs in the fourth chapter of the novel. Baumgartner's arrest comes unexpectedly during one of his ventures at Prince's nightclub in Calcutta immediately after the war breaks out. The ambush from the police establishes a mnemonic link between the present and the past taking Baumgartner back to a time in Berlin when he was bullied by children in school. When the humiliation of childhood transposes itself to the present, Baumgartner strikes back at the policemen, biting and hitting them with all his might. But the policemen, greater in number, overpower him and he is brought to the police station against his will. It is here where he learns about his impending internment from an apologetic Indian policeman who admits, 'British make rules here, sir, not Indians' (*BB*, 120). With the declaration of WWII, Baumgartner and his kind become enemy aliens in the British Empire due to their German citizenship. In Germany, he is persecuted by the Nazis because of his Jewishness, and in British India he is singled out by the British authority because of his Germanness.

The precariousness of Baumgartner's dual identities — German and Jewish — makes him the target of two different historical forces in spite of their conflicting interests and nature. On the one hand, Baumgartner is dispatched from Germany in haste because his Jewishness seems to defile the sanctity of the Fatherland. On the other, Baumgartner is nothing more than a 'German born in Germany' in the eyes of British authority (*BB*, 121). Therefore, according to their perception, Baumgartner's case requires no special attention or reconsideration.

Baumgartner's German-Jewish refugee background is stripped of its nuanced complexity and consequently he is reduced to the figure of a one-dimensional German citizen in possession of a German passport. It is this fact alone that qualifies him to be perceived as a threat to the British Empire. From 1939 to 1945, he has to spend six long years in confinement, first at Fort William, then in Ahmednagar, and then in the Himalayas. The prolonged captivity severs all ties between Baumgartner and the external world for the entirety of the war. The internment camp doubly removes Hugo Baumgartner from his mother and the pain of this further separation makes him desperate for information regarding her current whereabouts and condition in the Third Reich. Hugo's enquiries about his mail delivery are in vain as her letters never reach Hugo in the camp, making his anxiety grow worse.

The Jewish inmates of the camp, as we will also note in Aronson's memoir, are forced into an unnerving cohabitation with staunch supporters of the Nazi Party. In this novel we see the camp-guards at Fort William carry out thorough examinations of the inmates' tents every morning and insist on making the bed according to military standards. Inside Baumgartner's camp, his fellow inmate Schmidt, a devoted Nazi supporter, receives all the attention and admiration of the English guards because of his neatness. Baumgartner is reprimanded for not reaching Schmidt's level of perfection: 'Can't you see how Schmidt does it? Can't you try and be like him?' (*BB*, 121) The silent stare exchanged between the British prison guard and the Nazi inmate conveys their mutual contempt towards the racially 'inferior' Jew who fails to follow 'European' standards. Setting aside their greater conflicts in Europe, the British guard unites with the 'Aryan' German in the internment camp to berate the racial other. Baumgartner senses the complicity between them: 'Baumgartner could see that they were of a kind – the ruling kind' (*BB*, 121). Schmidt's insolence towards Baumgartner is also evident when the former actively tries to maintain physical distance from Baumgartner in a crowded truck conveying 'the utter disgust he felt at being placed in the same category as him' (*BB*, 122).

Despite a number of unmistakable affinities between Desai and Aronson's narratives, the description of the camps in *Baumgartner's Bombay* evokes a sense of a more menacing and bleak environment which is largely dominated either by low-ranking British guards or the Nazi inmates. The text suggests certain similarities between the ways in which "lesser functionaries of the camp" in British India and concentration camp authorities in Nazi Germany treated their inmates (*BB*, 126). The British internment camp guards are described as sadists who take pleasure in bullying the inmates:

It was these [lesser functionaries of the camp] who made their presence felt, strongly and unpleasantly. They took a particular pleasure in rounding up the men and undressing them, then separating them according to size and appearance, like cattle, making jeering remarks as they did so. Baumgartner found himself standing with his hands dangling, his knees buckling, while they looked over him and joked.
(*BB*, 126)

Following the informal takeover of the camp by the Nazis, stricter work culture is established all over to ensure every inmate is occupied with a task. Desai writes, 'Whereas the British

commandant had only half-heartedly carried out what was a mere formality, almost a mockery of a true ceremony, the Nazis seized upon it with an authority that was awesome... In no time, the men were lined up, the lines straightened, the men straightened...' (BB, 134). The Nazis take out their frustration on the Jewish internees when the news of Russian victory in Stalingrad in 1943 reaches the camp through secret radio transmissions. The Jews are made to stand straight on the parade ground and sing '*Deutschland, Deutschland überalles.*' They are subjected to racial segregation and hostility within the camp. They are forced to show allegiance to the German flag and to the man responsible for their misfortune by putting their right arm up saying 'Heil Hitler!' (BB, 135). Considering Desai's own take on the Nazi thrall over the camp, Stef Craps argues, '... the internment camp begins to resemble Nazi Germany, to the point of becoming "an extension" of it, as the British authorities allow the Nazis among the inmates to occupy positions of power in the camp and to impose on the Jewish internees the same forms of authority to which they would have been subjected back home in Germany.'¹¹ The difference in ideologies becomes a major issue with a number of Jewish inmates who eventually revolt against the Nazis; a couple of fights between the two groups break out which forces the authority to finally arrange a separate space for the Jews. The confusion of it is sardonically expressed by a Jewish inmate who asks, 'And what shall we call our new home... Auschwitz or Theresienstadt?' (BB, 137). Needless to say, at this point, the stark differences between a concentration camp such as Auschwitz and an internment camp in British India need to be acknowledged. In India, the ultimate authority is the British, so the Nazis here have restricted power. The lives of Jewish inmates are not under severe threat. In spite of the Nazi abuse they face, the Jewish inmates in India are able to retain their agency to an extent that would be unimaginable in a German concentration camp. Here, they are in a position to decline orders from the Nazis—something that would invite dire consequences in a Nazi camp in Europe.

Alongside portraying the mistreatment of the Jewish internees in the camp, the novel also depicts interactions and friendships between fellow Jewish inmates. Baumgartner befriends a number of Jewish refugees to combat the pangs of loneliness and confinement inflicted by the condition of internment. With the separation from the Nazis comes the exclusion from camp activities which causes further emptiness in Baumgartner's life. In absence of work, two contradictory impulses develop in his mind. On the one hand, he yearns for more information about Germany. His thoughts are preoccupied with what is happening there and his mother's present condition in that country. On the other, he wants to evade history by constructing an

imaginary wall between himself and the historical violence of the Nazis. It is in this circumstance he ‘found any relationship at all a relief from the oppression of solitude, the tyranny of solitary thought’ (*BB*, 145). Intrigued by the varied personalities and professions of his new acquaintances, he begins to spend more time in their company drawing solace out from these individuals. Of particular importance is the businessman Julius Roth, as conversations with him bring back memories of Baumgartner’s father’s showroom in Berlin. Also mentioned in the texts are Baumgartner’s interactions with Emil Schwarz, the scholar of oriental studies, Dr. Herschele, a vet trying to pass himself off as a well-established doctor, and Huber and Galitsino, two Austrian mountaineers who escape the camp with their group. These interactions testify to the multiplicity within the Jewish inmates in the camp. They all come from different walks of life and share only two traits in common: their Jewishness and their lack of control over history.

Baumgartner’s Bombay alludes to Thomas Mann’s novel *The Magic Mountain*, striking another similarity with Aronson’s memoir which I analyse later. But the perceptions of the ‘magic mountain’ are subjective in both cases. In Aronson’s work, we will see Santiniketan assuming the role of the magic mountain to provide him with protection from contemporary historical forces. But for Baumgartner, Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*, which Emil tries to bring to his attention, means little. Its title has no ‘relevance’ for Baumgartner in the uninspiring, ‘flat, dust-smothered camp’ (*BB*, 154). The plot and the theme of the novel fail to resonate with Baumgartner not because they are ‘irrelevant’; they do not impact him in the same way because Baumgartner lacks curiosity. It is almost as if he is paralysed or blocked to a certain extent: ‘The habits of an only child, of an isolated youth in an increasingly unsafe and threatening land [...] had made Baumgartner hold on to himself the fears he had about his mother, about what was happening in Germany, allowing it to become a dark, monstrous block’ (*BB*, 127). Engaging with allegories and metaphors under this circumstance seem a meaningless exercise to him. The Nazi abuse in the internment camp under the British watch makes Baumgartner fret over his mother in Germany. The realities of the camp function as a distressing reminder of her mother living the horrors of the Third Reich. Baumgartner is also apprehensive about his future in India, knowing the possibility of a return to Germany is slim. Amidst the unpleasantly overwhelming speculation whether ‘the long internment had not incapacitated him, made him unfit for the outer world’ (*BB*, 154), the question of place and placelessness and root and rootlessness reappear to torment Baumgartner’s thoughts. When the end of WWII is proclaimed after Hitler’s suicide, Baumgartner is unable to rejoice at the

defeat of the Nazis. The affliction of being ‘a man without a family or a country’ makes the prospect of release a daunting thought (*BB*,155). But this pain is not exclusive to Baumgartner. The awkward celebration of victory at the camp hints at the collective uncertainty and unease felt by the inmates. After a prolonged detachment from the outer world, they are no longer in the position to encounter it as it comes. Furthermore, forced separation from families, the thought of what has happened to them in Nazi-ravaged Europe, the colossal massacre unleashed by the war, the news of war crimes and countless deaths all pervade their minds. The ‘song of graves, and funerals, of death on battlefields, of endings and defeats’ therefore becomes the ‘anthem’ of these individuals during the strange celebration of victory of which Baumgartner is a ‘crushed and wrecked and wretched’ representative (*BB*,157-58).

Crossings between the Holocaust and the Indian Partition of 1947

The sixth chapter of the novel shows overt continuities between the violence of the Holocaust and the gory Indian partition of 1947 by situating Baumgartner in the heart of riot-torn Calcutta. Following his release from the internment camp in north India, Baumgartner makes an immediate return to Calcutta with an intense sense of apprehension concerning his mother’s condition. The state he finds Calcutta in upon his arrival is bleak: ‘The streets were black with litter, the lights broken, the odour of decay strong’ (*BB*,189). These visible, olfactory markers of growing communal tension between the Hindus and the Muslims unsettle him and make him yearn for the safety and order prevalent in the British internment camps. Moreover, the tragic realization of his mother’s death in Germany also awaits Baumgartner. While collecting his belongings from the Middleton Row hotel he had been living in before his internment, Baumgartner comes across several postcards from his mother all of which bear an official instruction ‘Rückantwort nur an Postkarten in deutscher Sprache’ (*BB*,191). Apart from the familiar endearments and her mother’s signature, messages on the postcards appeared to be very strange, their contents menacingly brief and unchanging:

Keep well, my rabbit. Do not worry. I am well. Where are you, my mouse? Are you well? I am well. Do not worry. I have enough. Have you enough? Mutti.
Mü. (*BB*,192)

His mother’s death at the hands of the Nazis becomes evident to him through her last postcard, which dates back to as early as February, 1941, and the silence that follows. Overpowered by sadness

and survivor's guilt, Baumgartner renounces his pre-war life of luxury and comfort and relocates to a shabby room tucked into an old multi-storey building near Free School Street. Baumgartner realizes the extent of Calcutta's Hindu-Muslim conflict for the first time when he meets his former business associate Habibullah to discuss the possibilities of his re-entering the timber business. Through his conversation with Habibullah, Baumgartner finds out that, as a Muslim businessman in the city, Habibullah feels threatened by the Congress party members and the aggressive Hindu mob targeting Muslim minorities. Habibullah is aware of his increasingly marginal status amidst the majority and when Baumgartner brings up the talk of business, Habibullah replies:

For us- 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 in the street, rob him too. Don't you know, sahib, they are driving us out? (*BB*, 196)

Habibullah then reveals his intent to sell off his business to a Marwari merchant and leave India for Dacca (now Dhaka) with his family before it is too late. Baumgartner learns that Calcutta, that was once welcoming and inclusive of the minorities, is now forcing them out due to religious intolerance. The internment camp had caused a rift between Baumgartner and the external world and very little information on the transformations of both Europe and the Indian subcontinent could percolate through its invisible walls. A puzzled Baumgartner comes to the sad realization that torn by the famine, war, and volatile Hindu-Muslim relations, Calcutta has changed in his absence and without him knowing. In Habibullah Baumgartner unexpectedly recognizes a victim of expulsion, someone whose experience of threat and exclusion may be compared with that of his own in spite of the specificities. Both their countries — Germany and India — are 'finished'; their homelands have stopped existing in the same manner and form as they used to. Baumgartner and Habibullah become representatives of innumerable unfortunate citizens failed by the shifting identities of their respective nations. Denounced by the erratic attempts at cleansing of the minorities, both Baumgartner and Habibullah act as the emblems of stateless subjects on the look-out for new homelands. But interestingly, as evident from their conversation, neither of them are aware of the specificities of the other's sufferings: "But Habibullah had no more conception of Baumgartner's war, of Europe's war than Baumgartner had of affairs in Bengal, in India." (*BB*, 198) Their being unaware of each other's history of persecution shows an unfortunate ignorance and lack of curiosity towards contemporaneous socio-political developments around the globe. Baumgartner does not know about political developments in India. Therefore, the growing intolerance between the Hindus and the Muslims comes as a shock to him in the beginning. It is the reason why he naively believes Habibullah's business 'will go on' in spite of his Muslim identity in riot-torn Bengal (*BB*, 195). On

the other hand, to Habibullah, all of Europe is reduced to India's ruling race, the English, and therefore Baumgartner is just one member of the European/English race with no specific history of his own. The nuances of his German-Jewish identity do not mean much to Habibullah. Baumgartner, for Habibullah, is an emblem of the recent English victory and an important, useful person with a lot of potential to bring business from Europe to India. He asks Baumgartner, rather innocently, 'Are you not English, European Sahib? Have you no European connections?' (*BB*, 197)

The suggestion of relocating to Bombay comes from Habibullah who thinks the prospect of Calcutta has diminished by the violence of communal discord and the economic disaster brought about by the famine of 1943. But Baumgartner stays here for more than a year before making a move to Bombay. During the course of this period, Baumgartner is continually disturbed by the day-to-day destruction of communal harmony he silently witnesses around him. Different parts of Calcutta are set on fire; its flames disrupt the flow of life; its smoke engulfs what is left of the city. Screams of people and gunshots pierce through the pitch-black nights, sounds of hurried footsteps reverberate through dark allies and lanes. Processions, strikes, and barricades become interwoven in the fabric of quotidian urban affairs. Baumgartner sympathetically notices the malnourished, poverty-stricken locals living amidst filth and misery while hearing the news of transference of food to the soldiers of the British army. Encountering the changing history of India on streets, Baumgartner realizes:

His war was not their war. And they had had their own war. War within war within war. Everyone engaged in a separate war, and each war opposed to another war... A great web in which each one was trapped, a nightmare from which one could not emerge. (*BB*, 202)

To think of contemporary histories as an interconnected web is to be able to identify a sense of continuity between different manifestations of historical forces of violence despite their distinct characteristics. As a German Jew, Baumgartner would not have been involved in the history of violent Hindu-Muslim riots of 1946-47 in India had his life followed its standard course in Germany. But forced exile from Nazi Germany unexpectedly makes him a witness to Indian Partition, one of the many dire consequences of the British rule in India. Leaving one form of European violence behind — namely, the Nazi onslaught on Jews in mainland Europe — Baumgartner gets involved in another manifestation of violence cunningly devised by the West: the logical consequence of the British policy of 'divide and rule' in India.

Baumgartner's Bombay demands that we take into account both these overt and covert connections between different historical traumas of Europe and Asia in our analysis for a holistic

interpretation of its text and context. Aamir R. Mufti succinctly sums up this primary objective of the novel in *Enlightenment in the Colony*: ‘Desai’s novel seeks to excavate a subterranean history — not simply of Europe, as in Arendt’s well-known argument about the rise of Nazism — but of the modern world, a network of subterranean and uncanny linkages that connect “Europe” to the world’s “Peripheries”.’¹² Furthermore, Mufti explores uncomfortable resonances between the ‘Jewish Question’ in 1930s Europe and the precarious position of Muslims in India after 1948, despite the fact that Abul Kalam Azad, a Muslim, was the First Minister of Education in the newly independent India. As Mufti puts it in his study of Indian writers of Muslim descent: ‘the central question within this drama is whether the Muslims indeed constitute a *minority*.’¹³ Mufti’s work points towards modern nationalism’s troubling tendency to create ‘others’, who are then perceived as a political problem for the modern nation-state.

The way Baumgartner’s memory of Nazi persecution is triggered by the violence in Calcutta in 1946-47 further draws out the connections between these world events. On one of the dreadful nights in Calcutta, the violence traverses beyond the streets and enters Baumgartner’s own building, contaminating the harmony of his immediate vicinity. Startled by the sound of gun fire, Baumgartner watches from his window as a group of men covered in ‘blood-soaked clothes’ advance towards his building with ‘torches and knives, screaming those slogans of religious warfare that were raised everywhere now’ (*BB*,209). Just when Baumgartner secures his door by placing his chair and bag against it, he hears a loud scream of a man from the loft above his landing. It becomes clear to him that the target of the attack is his Marxist friend Sushil. Baumgartner rushes up to Sushil’s room only to find his lifeless body slumped on the floor in a pool of blood. (Ironically, the Marxist Sushil had told Baumgartner that he admired Hitler’s Germany, simply because it opposed the British Empire – another example of political ignorance, or rather, indifference to the fate of the Jews. Again, this highlights the general incomprehension that Baumgartner encounters in India). The crime scene in a decrepit building in Bengal suddenly triggers Baumgartner’s memory of his mother’s annihilation in Nazi Germany, disturbingly conjuring up her final moments in his imagination:

In his sleep, in his dreams, the blood was Mutti’s, not the boy’s. Yet his mother- so small, so weak- could not have spilt so much blood. Or had she? The blood ran, ran over the floor and down the stairs, soaking his feet which stood in it helplessly. (*BB*,210)

When Baumgartner goes on to inquire about Habibullah next morning, he finds out an empty and ruthlessly destroyed space that bears little resemblance to the office that was once there. Baumgartner comes to the realization that, similar to the Jews in Germany, all Muslims have become vulnerable to Hindu attacks, and vice-versa, in the face of erupting communal violence, regardless of class positions. War replaces war, the ‘global war’ is followed by the ‘colonial war’, only to be superseded by the ‘religious war’, and each time, Baumgartner gets drawn into the bloodshed, confusion and chaos unleashed by these forces (*BB*,210). Seeking an exit from the mindless carnage, Baumgartner follows Habibullah’s advice and departs Calcutta for Bombay on the same day.

Exile Experience and the Question of Belonging

While Baumgartner encounters innumerable obstacles that hinder his assimilation into India, it is possible to trace a number of attempts on his part to adapt to the host country. His negotiations with various Indian languages require special mention here. As a German citizen, Baumgartner does not boast a strong grip over English- the main European language in contemporary India- which hinders him from using it as the primary mode of communication. He also realizes upon his arrival that German, the language of his ‘identity and cultural filiation’ has no place in the subcontinent.¹⁴ Although he speaks German with his friend Lotte, he does not reject or look down upon the new languages he encounters in India. In spite of their variety and strangeness, he picks up some words such as ‘chai, khana, baraf, laojaldi, joota, chota, peg, pani, karma, soda, garee...’ not knowing whether ‘they were English or Hindi or Bengali’ (*BB*,107). In the process of learning and appropriating the languages according to his needs and requirements, Baumgartner ends up creating a language of his own which is ‘not Indian, but India’s’ to negotiate with ‘the India he was marking out for himself.’ (*BB*,107). However, the struggle to familiarise himself with the Indian languages is colossal, and despite his initial efforts, Baumgartner fails to claim those languages as his own. With exile comes the inevitable loss of the mother tongue, German, and the pain generated by this tragedy exerts substantial impact on Baumgartner’s feeling of non-belonging in India. Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan is of the view that this linguistic loss incurred by the experience of exile is felt by everyone ‘learning a foreign language.’¹⁵ Drawing upon Eva Hoffman’s experience of emigration from Poland to Canada, and later, to the United States as recorded in her memoir, Erdinast-Vulcan writes:

When we learn our mother tongue, there is no sense of mediation: it seems the words are identical to their referents and express the word directly.

When we learn a foreign language, we know that the words are only representations, or- to use the Saussurean term- that signifiers are arbitrary, and their relation to their signifiers is purely a matter of linguistic convention.¹⁶

In Baumgartner's case, too, the Indian languages, unlike German, lack the integral linkages with reality. That Hindi, English, Bengali, or the blend thereof are primarily a means of making-do in the foreign land and that they do not carry the same level of ease and assurance of German is evident in Baumgartner's selective learning, and the limited day-to-day negotiations with Indian people. Baumgartner's love for Lotte can be perceived as his affinity for the German language, an avenue for the expression of his innermost attachment to the mother tongue. Knowing the impossibility of a return to war-ravaged Germany and a complete assimilation in India, he re-establishes the long-lost connection between himself and his first language through conversations with Lotte in German.

Baumgartner learns to adapt to the Indian ways of life and becomes more accepting of the country despite its heat, smell, and poverty. Much to Lotte's shock, he partakes of unfamiliar Indian curries on his first day in India. On the other hand, his acquaintance with the young Marxist Sushil, his friendships with Chimanlal, Habibullah, and Farrokh, and their willingness, in turn, to aid Baumgartner in moments of crisis show that India, too, at least in some instances, becomes accepting of Baumgartner. The relationship between Baumgartner and India is not hostile but rather ambivalent. Baumgartner's exile in India has multiple layers characterized by the tension between belonging and non-belonging and place and placelessness, and agency and the lack thereof. At times, Baumgartner is undermined in India, but at other times India also provides care and support to him. But the possibility of a more profound kind of bond between the refugee and the refuge gets thwarted due to various malignant historical and human forces, and at times, due to Baumgartner's own reluctance. Baumgartner's childhood pain of exclusion and abuse makes it challenging for him to forge new relationships with new people in the new land. Baumgartner's own thoughts, affected by his painful past in Nazi Germany, constantly feed into his sense of otherness and alienation which further segregates him from others. At times, Baumgartner's isolation is imposed upon him, at times he voluntarily chooses detachment over human company.

From as early as the first chapter which opens on the last day of his life, we get access into Baumgartner's mind through the omniscient narrator. The novel uses free indirect discourse which suggests that the third person narrator inhabits the mind of the protagonist to a certain extent. It is an ambivalent technique, as it implies both closeness to and distance from the protagonist but grants us important access into Baumgartner's psyche nevertheless. The third person narrator slips in and out of Baumgartner's stream of consciousness exposing his innermost agonies and insecurities to the readers. Due to the irony of fate, the sense of being an outcast, by Baumgartner's own admission, gets magnified on the last day of his life: 'It was a long time since he had felt so acutely aware of his outlandishness... for a long time it had not been as it was today' (*BB*,23). In spite of living in India for more than fifty years, he considers himself to be an outsider still grappling with the question of belonging with renewed dismay. In all these years, he has not encountered somebody akin to him. Because of the uniqueness of his background and experiences, he has not been able to place himself squarely in any of the existing categories of people. His labelling of himself as an eternal outcast is marked by the complex peril of 'never enough': '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 firangi. In both lands, the unacceptable" (*BB*,23). Even if these thoughts are coloured by the perspective of the third person narrator to an extent, they suggest the precariousness of Baumgartner's position both in the East and the West. In the West, Baumgartner's Jewishness makes him too 'oriental' to qualify as a part of the 'mainstream' even before the Nazi onslaught. But as an assimilated Jewish child with a liberal upbringing, he is also engulfed by an overwhelming feeling of isolation at the Jewish school in Berlin. In the East, on the other hand, he is not 'oriental' enough to blend in with the mainstream. Here, it is predominantly his white German identity that isolates Baumgartner from the Indians as the concept of firangi essentially stands for 'white man'.

The only place where Baumgartner thinks he may have truly belonged is Venice, the Italian city in which he spends a week before embarking on the ship towards India. The relief and joy of belonging which he experiences through the communion of the East and the West in those seven days significantly makes it to his final conversations with Lotte more than five decades later in her bleak little Bombay apartment: 'If I could go, if I could leave, then I would go to Venice' (*BB*,94). Bearing 'so little relation to the Europe of the North' Venice prepares Baumgartner for his first encounter with the East by opening up a new world of possibilities before him (*BB*,67). Those seven days in Venice mark a very important period in

Baumgartner's life for several reasons. Here, contrary to the Germany under Nazi rule, the binary between self and other is not strictly imposed and antagonism between different categories dissolves in the vibrant multicultural chaos. It is in Venice where he accepts his Jewishness for the first time in his life - this occurs after he encounters a young woman artist of Jewish origin at a restaurant. Baumgartner's voluntary identification with his Jewish heritage makes him want to seek out the Jewish quarter in the city which, he feels, will grant him a suitable identity. But even after he ends up in a different area away from his intended destination by mistake, his new-found sense of belonging lingers. Venice, in its totality, allows Baumgartner to experience a certain kind of feeling that eludes him both in Germany and India:

Venice *was* the East, and yet it was Europe too; it was that magic boundary where the two met and blended, and for those seven days Hugo had been a part of their union. He realized it only now: 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*, 73)

Baumgartner's sense of an intrinsic connection with Venice – which, due to its long sea-trading tradition, represents a historic crossroads between East and West – shows his intense desires and his ability to identify with a particular place. Furthermore, Baumgartner's many attempts to come to terms with India indicate his inclination to carve out a space for himself in the host country despite his sense of otherness.

Considering the above two important aspects, it is unfair to dismiss Baumgartner as an emblem of the 'wandering Jew', a negative stereotype which has dominated common perception and representation of Jewish identity for centuries. In *Space and Place in Jewish Studies*, Barbara E. Mann remarks that this stereotype reduces Jewish identity to a predominantly placeless entity that poses a threat to any stable, rooted society. Mann argues that this antisemitic stereotype 'challenged the very status of Jew as "modern" and their inability to become a part of modern national entities.'¹⁷ But Baumgartner is indeed a part of India. In spite of the pangs of alienation, Baumgartner has lived in this country for more than five decades. The space he occupies in the host country, no matter how insignificant, small, and marginal, is still his own, transformed by a concoction of his German, Jewish, immigrant identities. The rootlessness generated from the condition of exile has both negative and positive connotations for Baumgartner. While the negativity in the losses he has met is

undeniable, his movements enable him to constitute his own Jewish space wherever he has travelled or stayed in — be it Bombay, Calcutta or the Himalayas. The scope of these essentially non-Jewish spaces gets extended by the presence of Baumgartner to incorporate his history and identity as a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany. Coined by Diana Pinto in 1996, the term ‘Jewish space’, in the European context, refers to the destruction of local Jewry in various European nations due to the Holocaust.¹⁸ If the disappearance of local Jewish population informs the understanding of Jewish spaces in Europe, it is exactly its opposite that characterizes such spaces in contemporary Asia and other continents. While approximately six million Jews faced annihilation in Nazi Europe, those who managed to immigrate to safer zones brought with them their Jewish heritage to the countries of refuge. In spite of the presence of local Jewish communities, most of these host countries, including India, were predominantly outside the scope of the Holocaust until the arrival of these Jewish refugees. But the appearance of these exiles soon transforms these host countries into Jewish spaces, or enhances their existing identities as Jewish spaces, adding a rich layer of plurality in their national characters and cultures. Contrary to its etymology, the conceptualization of Jewish spaces constructs an essentially positive platform ‘where Jews and non-Jews can engage with each other anew.’¹⁹ The Jewish spaces that Baumgartner creates in different parts of India through his movements enable him to have meaningful relations with other Jews and non-Jews. To reiterate Aamir R. Mufti, these connections, in turn, qualify Baumgartner to see himself as ‘India’s’, much like the language that he speaks here.²⁰

Baumgartner’s Death and Conclusion

The Germany Baumgartner had left as a young man to escape annihilation catches up with him at the end in Bombay when he gets brutally murdered by a German man named Kurt. Baumgartner first encounters Kurt, an impoverished counter-cultural hippie travelling all over the sub-continent, at the Cafe de Paris where he goes to collect left-over food for his family of cats. Baumgartner is quick to recognize that: ‘The boy was German... A German from Germany. He has sensed, he had *smelt* the German in him like a cat might smell another and know its territory’ (*BB*,24).

In this observation, we first note that Baumgartner has become cat-like here; he has come to resemble his surrogate family of cats. Secondly, the sight of Kurt reminds Baumgartner of the experiences of a painful past in Nazi Germany, the country he had left more than fifty years

ago. Kurt's appearance immediately triggers in Baumgartner the pain associated with the Holocaust. Kurt epitomizes the spirit of the Nazi ideology and comes across as a representative of the Hitler Youth who had exhibited mindless violence towards the Jews.

That fair hair, that peeled flesh and the flash on the wrist — it was a certain type that Baumgartner had escaped, forgotten. Then why had this boy to come after him, in lederhosen, in marching boots, striding over the mountains to the sound of the *Wandervogels Lied*? The Lieder and the campfire. The campfire and the beer. The beer and the yodelling. The yodelling and the marching. The marching and the shooting. The shooting and the killing. The killing and the killing and the killing. (BB,25)

After his ominous encounter with Kurt, Baumgartner somehow knows his end is near, and he quickly removes himself from the site by running away to Lotte's. But as fate would have it, Baumgartner returns to the cafe for the second time and ends up taking Kurt to his apartment with him, inviting his own tragic end. It is almost as if Baumgartner knows his life will come to a full circle only after being killed by Kurt.

In the interview with Jussawalla, Anita Desai admits that she had conceived of two possible endings for the novel, of which she deliberately chose Kurt's murdering of Baumgartner because it had more significance.

Although I knew he would die in the end, I had no idea who was going to kill him, and right through the book I was playing with two alternative endings. The other person who could have killed him was that beggar who lives on the street in front of his house, in whose eyes Baumgartner is wealthy. He could easily have robbed him and killed him. I had, in fact, written two alternative endings for that book. One was his murder by this beggar, but that dissatisfied me because that was simply random violence, it was the kind of murder that takes place in big cities. It had no real meaning and Baumgartner was left incomplete or unfulfilled in a certain sense, because all through he has a sense of having escaped death in Germany. His mother was killed but he escaped. The reason for his sadness through the book is this death that he escaped so that it pursues him and stalks him right through the book. 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 a death by a Nazi, a German. That gave me a certain satisfaction, that he had met the kind of death that fate had devised for him anyway. He had fooled fate for awhile and escaped for awhile, but in the end it got him.²¹

As reincarnation of the Nazis, Kurt repeats the patterned torment meted out by the Nazis to the Jews in his treatment of Baumgartner. First and foremost, he invades 'Baumgartner's Bombay', then his apartment at Hira Niwas, and then treats his beloved family of cats with the utmost contempt. Later, he murders Baumgartner in his sleep, loots his prized silver trophies and runs off without facing any consequences. According to Mufti, this mnemonic linking of the German man with Nazi Germany is 'substantive and not merely metaphorical' as it serves as an indication of the 'continuity between contemporary Europe and that earlier genocide.'²² The fact that Kurt is unaware of the circumstances leading to Baumgartner's displacement from Europe and relocation to India criticizes contemporary Germany's inadequate handling of its dark Nazi past. Mufti also adds, 'And that this young German killer of the old Jew escapes detection and capture is a telling comment on the claims to progress in post-war Europe and the evasion of historical responsibility that is implicit in this counter-cultural rejection of classical European culture.'²³ While Baumgartner's death at the hands of Kurt provides a very tragic end to the novel, it sets the narrative into its circular motion revealing 'a condition that has not yet been worked through and therefore has not yet been overcome, rather than a linear one fated inexorably toward decline.'²⁴

Although Baumgartner is murdered by a European, his isolation is underlined by the general incomprehension that follows his death. Chimanlal's son declares it to be a police matter. Only Baumgartner's friend Farrokh, the Parsi café owner, shows concern and respect for his memory. The official/judicial response will be inadequate, because Baumgartner's story falls outside the administrative competence of the modern state. As Mufti puts it, 'Liberal secularism in the post-Enlightenment era, [...] repeatedly encounters the stumbling block of minority as both the object of its projects and the sign of its own impossibility.'²⁵ What, if anything, is modern society to do with an outsider like Baumgartner? How is he to be remembered? To what extent do minorities like Baumgartner and his German-Jewish emigré friends Lotte, Gisela and Julius 'belong' to India? Can they be accommodated into modern socio-cultural narratives, and if so, how? Wisely, Desai's novel leaves these profound questions open.

Chapter 2: Vishram Bedekar's *Ranaangan*

Introduction

Ranaangan is an Indian novel written by renowned Marathi novelist, playwright, and filmmaker Vishram Bedekar (1906-1998). A terse, fast-paced text depicting Indo-Jewish encounters just prior to the eruption of WWII, *Ranaangan* was originally published in Marathi in 1939. With *Ranaangan*, Bedekar introduced a novel that is boldly unconventional and unprecedented in terms of both form and content to the contemporaneous Marathi literary landscape. The novel critiques the Nazi discrimination against the Jews long before the Nazi horrors took the shape of the Holocaust and became known world-wide. The style is deliberately rapid and chaotic, precisely to match the historical time the novel is set in. Titled 'Battlefield' in Jerry Pinto's English translation of the text (2021), my source material, the novel is progressive and prescient in its handling of the theme of Jewish persecution and the Jewish refugee crisis during the Nazi rule in Germany.

Apart from representing cultural and romantic encounters between Indians and German Jewish refugees, the novel raises pertinent questions about love, power, and victimization and challenges toxic nationalist fervour prevalent in contemporary world politics. The main plot line follows the interracial shipboard romance between Chakradhar Vidhwans, a proud Indian man returning home from Europe, and Herta von Hinne, a persecuted Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany who is travelling to Shanghai in search of a new home with her old and ailing mother. Although short-lived, the relationship between Chakradhar and Herta, together with other interracial friendships and budding romances on board, shed light on the dynamics of Indo-Jewish transcultural exchanges in the 1930s. Both Herta and Chakradhar are transformed by their intense romantic relation spanning only ten days of a sea voyage from Genoa to Mumbai – although Herta later travels on to Shanghai. By Herta's own admission, the debilitating antisemitic measures of Hitler's Nazi Germany had stripped her of human dignity, and it is only in Chakradhar's company that she feels emotionally replenished again. The proud, self-centred, and pleasure-seeking Chakradhar becomes more empathetic, humane, and aware of the extent of modern Jewish predicament only after he comes into contact with Herta. However, in spite of its redeeming qualities, Herta and Chakradhar's love story ends in

a tragedy when Herta commits suicide after their forced separation – the outbreak of war between Britain and Germany means that their marriage would be impossible. The word ‘battlefield’ which also serves as the title of the book appears a few times in the text, and each time it carries two primary implications. The word indicates that spaces that are essentially innocuous and safe are transformed into battlefields during wars – e.g. the idyllic rural France, otherwise safe countries like India where innocent Germans like Herta are classified as enemy aliens. Secondly, it suggests that war-time reality, even outside the marked combat zone, becomes akin to the reality of a battlefield where survival of love is an extraordinary affair.

The questions that I seek to answer in this chapter are:

1. To what extent can this novel help us understand the dynamics of Jewish-Indian solidarity or the lack thereof immediately prior to WWII?
2. To what extent were Indians informed about the plight of German Jews under the Nazi regime and how did they react to the Nazi persecution of Jews and the contemporary Jewish refugee crisis?
3. How did ocean liners become a site for the exchange of transcultural memories, histories and trauma?
4. In what ways does the novel connect the Jewish question with minority issues in India?

I attempt to answer these questions by looking at the portrayal of diverse Indo-Jewish encounters on the ship from Europe to Asia and by closely analysing their exchanges, emotions, and attitude towards each other.

I have already discussed in my previous chapter that in an attempt to challenge the stereotype of the wandering Jew figure, Barbara Mann advocates for the idea of creation of Jewish spaces through acts of movements. For an ethnic and religious identity group subjected to recurrent perils of placelessness, dislocation, and exile from ‘here’ to ‘there’, this line of thinking is extremely crucial to establish connections between Jewish people and their sense of belonging. In the modern Jewish imagination, writes Mann, the train ‘is the space where Jews meet other Jews, from near and far, as well gentiles of all national and ethnic stripes...’¹ Here, I would argue that during the Nazi regime in Europe, ocean liners would replace the train as the primary mode of transport for international travel, allowing a free exchange with non-Jewish passengers. Travelling on ships during this time would carry positive implications

for the persecuted Jews, signifying greater chances of survival due to the possibility of securing farther distance from the epicentre of violence, and gaining a space which enables them to recover the lost sense of agency and belonging. At the same time, the precariousness and dangers of sea voyages should also be acknowledged, especially for the Jewish refugees as many of them did not end up in their intended destinations (as is the case for Herta). Despite this peril, ships became significant spaces for transcultural encounters and the dissemination of news concerning the Jewish jeopardy in Nazi Germany- this is how Bedekar came to know of the antisemitic developments in the Third Reich in detail which he would then inform his Indian Maharashtrian audience through his novel. Also important is the fact that these ships provided scope for learning and transformation- as is the case for *Ranaangan*'s protagonist Chakradhar- by serving as sites for exchange of ideas, histories, anecdotes, and insights, and forming unlikely acquaintances, friendships, and romantic relationships.

At times the interactions on ocean liners also exposed disparate identity groups' apathy and antipathy, implicit and explicit racial bias, religious prejudice, unjust opinions and uninformed perceptions of others. When an argument between an Arab traveller and the Jewish travellers ensues at Port Said, the former's attitude towards the latter becomes evident, especially in his denial of Palestine as the Jewish homeland. The Indian passengers' attempt to raise funds for the Jewish refugees requires another mention. The proposal of fundraising is thwarted simply because the question of Jews is branded as an essentially European problem which does not directly affect Indians or the Indian politics. The narrative's incidents of racial tension, or indifference between ethnic groups, thwart the possibility of what Michael Rothberg terms 'differentiated solidarity.' At the same time, we also notice how the experience of co-existence during the course of travel helps many individuals to unlearn, and even contest their own ideas against different categories of the other, building avenues for creating differentiated solidarity. Chakradhar himself is an example of this positive transformation.

According to Bedekar, *Ranaangan* is solely a work of fiction, a product of his own imagination. But Bedekar's autobiography *Ek Zad Ani Don Pakshi (A Tree and Two Birds)*, intriguingly written in third person, shows parallels between his life and that of Chakradhar's. Similar to his protagonist Chakradhar who spends two years in England prior to his departure from Europe, Bedekar lived in Britain for seven months before being forced to return to India due to the threat of war. It is on the ship where Bedekar first beheld the distress of

approximately one hundred and fifty Jewish refugees travelling with him. ‘His eardrums almost burst listening to the stories of their torture. He could not bear the burden of that ‘co-suffering’, the mind became numb... This deadly experience was to occasion his novel *Ranangan*.’² Needless to say, his eye-witness encounters with Jewish refugees became some of the primary source materials for his novel. The use of the term ‘co-suffering’ – which recalls the German word *Mitleid* – is significant here as it suggests the transference of trauma from those Jewish exiles to Bedekar, a phenomenon that embedded the novelist with the history of the Holocaust. Therefore, the very act of writing *Ranangan* can be seen as a cathartic exercise on Bedekar’s part, providing him with creative avenues to channel his ‘co-suffering’ and bear witness to what was happening. The artistic outpouring of Bedekar’s pain, rage and anti-Fascist stance led to the genesis of perhaps the first ever Indian novel to draw attention to Hitler’s barbarity towards the Jews in the 1930s.

Analysis and Close Reading of the Text

The story of *Ranaangan/Battlefield* is divided into four chapters which are jointly recounted by Chakradhar himself and occasionally by an omniscient third person narrator. The first chapter sets off with Chakradhar’s eleven day-long journey from Europe to India coming to an end. The opening sentences of this chapter misleadingly paint a happy picture of Chakradhar’s deck enlivened by the joy of home-coming. The desolation entrenched in the scene becomes apparent only when Chakradhar unabashedly utters, ‘I should be delighted to see my motherland, right? Wrong’ (R,9). We discover that the reason behind this agony is his forced separation from a Jewish woman named Herta. Herta has a different destination from Chakradhar. While Chakradhar disembarks in Mumbai, Herta has to go on for another fortnight to reach her endpoint, Shanghai. This is the reason why Chakradhar’s mind ‘follows the ship’s route’ and he is unable to ‘get out of the berth’ even after arriving in his homeland (R,8, 9). A sorrowful scene of farewell soon follows – Herta breaks into tears and no word of consolation can help. Chakradhar, on the other hand, tries to withhold his emotions and forcefully removes himself from Herta’s embrace. Both Chakradhar and Herta, still young and in love with one another, are painfully aware that this is their final meeting:

Two human beings come together for a brief while, and then they say,
‘This is our last meeting.’ Does this generally happen? Not much, I

would think; except at the time of death. But that is what happened to us.

(R,13)

This excerpt is the first indication that the novel is set in an extraordinary time marked by extraordinary occurrences. Two days after the separation, Chakradhar finds out from a newspaper article that Herta has committed suicide. In its coverage of news from Hong Kong, *The Times* reports that a certain Miss Herta von Hinne ‘jumped into the sea and killed herself’ (R,17). The same newspaper covers the arrest of Herta’s last German employer Herr Nober and the death of her German lover Karl Franz. Anguished by Herta’s death, Chakradhar resorts to writing to assuage his grief. By his own admission, documentation of their ill-fated relationship becomes a therapeutic exercise for him.

In Chapter Two, the narrative voice shifts from first person to third person, creating a distance between the protagonist and the readers. The primary objective of this chapter is to familiarise the reader with Chakradhar’s character by providing important insights into his psyche and background. In Chakradhar we locate a confident, self-assertive young man travelling through Europe. Mainly unfolding in Paris of August, 1939, this chapter briefly documents the disintegration of European life, society, and culture in the period between the two great wars, captured in a series of conversations between Chakradhar and other minor characters. When he leaves the city on Rome Express, he finds himself enchanted by the bucolic scenes of rural France. When the train goes past a cluster of graves, he finds out from his co-passenger that these are ‘World War I’s gift to France: the graves of all the French soldiers who fell in the war’ (R,21). Immediately, the spell of idyll and beauty is shattered, turning the picturesque French countryside into a ‘battlefield’ where boundless bloodshed occurred twenty five years ago. Chakradhar is not up-to-date with the details of political developments in Europe, but he understands that another war is imminent. France is still strewn with visible markers of the destruction caused by World War I while anticipating another act of German aggression. Chakradhar realizes that ‘Europe had clawed itself out of a grave only to be teetering on the verge of another,’ failing to learn its lesson (R,22). And that is precisely why he decides to leave.

From the train scene, the novel moves back in time to depict Chakradhar’s eight day long stay in Paris, where he encounters a prostitute outside a nightclub on Rue de la Mare Blonde. This unnamed woman is a living example of the profound impact of war and post-war realities in determining the lives of non-combatants. The scene then moves from Paris to the

Roman Express depicting Chakradhar's conversation with one of his East London acquaintances Abdul Latif, an arms dealer. It soon becomes evident that Latif is a war profiteer with no heed to the suffering that wars generate. But what is also apparent in this section is Chakradhar's ignorance and apathy towards European Jews. In a bid to expose the likes of Latif, he foolishly remarks, 'The profiteers of England and France and their allies and the Jews have left nothing to take from Germany' (R,34). Chakradhar's inclusion of Jews in this category – his casual antisemitism – shows the widespread influence of contemporary Nazi propaganda against the Jews which spread to many European countries. Since Chakradhar has never been to Germany, his prejudiced comment suggests that he has often encountered antisemitic attitudes during his residence in Britain and France. The effect of this negative propaganda is one of the main reasons behind Chakradhar's ignorant generalization and bias against the Jews. Another instance of ignorance is when he first spots Herta on the ship and unknowingly blurts out a derogatory, stereotypical remark about Jews. His friendship with Herta nevertheless transforms him into a more informed person who begins to see through these stereotypes and questions them. Back to the present, Chakradhar's train crosses the border into the Italian territory where he attracts suspicion of the locals because of his British passport. He arrives at Genoa, taking in sights and sounds of Italy, and then embarks on the final stage of his journey — the ship to Mumbai, India. Thus ends the second chapter of the novel.

In Chapter Three, the narrative voice again shifts to Chakradhar from the third person. It marks an important section in the novel as it portrays Chakradhar's first meeting with Herta. This chapter begins with a description of Chakradhar's first day onboard. We see Chakradhar acquaint himself with a number of fellow passengers mainly from India and Europe. Among them are a young Maharashtrian doctor called Shinde, a Muslim Indian man named Mannan, a Sindhi man called Madnani, a German-Jewish child named Louis and his mother, and a German-Jewish man in his early fifties called Keitel. Chakradhar spots numerous other Europeans on the ship, many of whom, as he later finds out, are Jewish. That night Chakradhar and Herta spot each other for the first time in the ship's bar. Herta's facial features immediately catch Chakradhar's attention. Their firm, intense, and unabashed gaze falling upon one another signals the ardent romance about to transpire between the two. But before a formal introduction can take place, Chakradhar unknowingly ends up offending Herta with an ignorant and derogatory slur against the Jews during a game of bridge. (He insults one of the players by saying he is 'worse than a Jew'). The silent chemistry between

Chakradhar and Herta is disrupted by Chakradhar's insensitive utterance (R,57). Upon hearing this remark, Herta's expression stiffens. She instantly gets up and leaves the room with Mannan, who is already shown to be in the pursuit of wooing her. Reflecting on Herta's action and expression, Chakradhar asks himself if Herta is a Jew herself.

The narrative moves on from this scene to the first interaction between Keitel and Chakradhar. Interestingly, the first conversation between Shinde and Chakradhar revolves around Keitel, a German Jewish man (albeit, his Jewish identity was not revealed in the beginning). Keitel is desperate to master the English language, and his relentless inquiries regarding the meaning and spelling of English words makes him a subject of ridicule to Shinde. When Keitel approaches Chakradhar, he greets him with an awkward 'good night, sir' (R,58). After a few exchanges dominated by Keitel's urge to learn English, Chakradhar understands the reason behind Shinde's exasperation towards Keitel but continues the conversation. Chakradhar makes use of examples while describing the meaning of English words, and resorts to a way of speaking that resembles Keitel's own style. He also breaks his utterances into easy words and simple sentences, and provides synonyms and gestures to help Keitel clearly understand what he is saying. This prolonged talk establishes a friendship between Chakradhar and Keitel. Eventually Chakradhar learns that Keitel, disowned by the Third Reich, is on a quest to find refuge in Shanghai. He also learns that Keitel's preoccupation with English is not an eccentric trait, but rather a desperate attempt to master a valuable life skill he will soon require. As a former German citizen with limited hold over English, Keitel has to rely on external help on the ship to learn the language. He thereby deliberately seeks out young educated subjects of the British Empire such as Chakradhar and Dr. Shinde out of necessity. Verbal exchanges with these Indian men hone his English conversational skill, preparing him for a new life in Shanghai.

Keitel's more profound sense of displacement and his struggle to accept his condition of exiled Jew is symbolised by the unfortunate separation from his mother tongue. Keitel admits he detests the English language, yet German is of no use in China. He confides in Chakradhar:

I call myself a German... Germany is my motherland. German is my language. But Germany does not acknowledge me as a son. I am a Jew. I have been exiled so I am making my way to Shanghai. I do not know if I

will ever see my country again or hear the chaste German of the Unter der Linden [sic] again, so I have to learn this new language. (R,62)

The story of Keitel's banishment from Germany is the first personal account of the Nazi persecution of Jews to have appeared in the text. For the first time, many of Bedekar's contemporary Indian readers encounter the figure of a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany and gain understanding of personal refugee tragedy through the act of reading this section and the novel on the whole. Before this, they, too, like Chakradhar, were oblivious to the contemporary European Jewish crisis. Keitel's misfortune as a German Jew introduces to them a serious socio-political situation that would have far-reaching impacts across the world. Apart from representing the ongoing Nazi aggression against the Jews, the passage informs the readers of the anxiety felt by the Jewish refugees as a consequence of their separation from the homeland. After this revelation, Chakradhar's perception of Keitel undergoes a massive change. Following his conversation with Keitel, Chakradhar takes into account the mistreatment of Jewish passengers onboard and begins to ponder the Jewish question sincerely for the first time. Then comes the stark realization: 'So they were all Jews?' (R,62). He follows this observation with a pensive internal monologue connecting the dots:

In this floating world, white people will treat even black people well. They even manage to behave decently with Indians. But not with the Jews. The same was true of the Italians who respect Indians but behave badly with the Jews. Other bits began to fall into place. The German girl who was after Madnani. The girl Mannan had captured. Louis's mother and her affection for Shinde. It all fell into place now. They must be Jews. I had read some bits and bobs about them, lies mixed in with truths. The Nazis had begun to eliminate them. I had read that the same hatred seemed to be spreading through Italy, Hungary and Poland. (R,63)

With the Nazis' rise in Germany, European Jews were pushed into the lowest rung of the existing racial hierarchy. The use of the word 'even' in the above excerpt points towards the extreme marginalization of European Jewry which Chakradhar witnesses for the first time on the ship. Such maltreatment, in his opinion, surpasses the contemporary Western deprecation of the Blacks. One may argue that Chakradhar's way of thinking betrays the general supersessionist tendency to rank different histories of marginalization which further fuels the

competition for the first place in victimhood (Rothberg). However, his encountering of the Jewish suffering in contemporary Europe entails an uncanny, almost disorienting revelation. Being a subject of a colonial empire, Chakradhar has had no previous connections with Jewish history and predicament and the only trauma he has been aware of is the trauma of the empire in the subcontinent. His two years in England must also have revealed to him the attitude of the West towards blacks. But what he observes on the ship is the European marginalization of an identity group which forms an integral part of Europe itself. To echo Césaire's pronouncements, in the course of his journey on the ship, Chakradhar learns for the first time about the release of violence in the centre that he thought was reserved solely for Europe's peripheries. This unsettling insight may be one of the main reasons behind his comparative thinking.

Chakradhar refers to the existing Indian Jewry and ponders on the stereotypes and false narratives in circulation about Jews in general. His own reflection confuses him at times, but the more he reflects, the more informed he becomes regarding the Jewish predicament in modern times. On the way to 'the Grant Medical College in Mumbai', Chakradhar would have to go past a 'Jewish settlement at Nagpada' (R,63). By his own admission, 'The people didn't seem to fit with the mental impression I had formed of them: money-grabbing Shylocks with hooked noses, who lacked all humanity' (63). Here, through this part of the monologue inspired evidently by Shylock's speech from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, Chakradhar draws attention to Indian Jewry's peaceful co-existence with other identity groups in the subcontinent. 'Were these ordinary people, who looked like other Indians, really the repository of all vices, as I had read?' is a question that persists in Chakradhar's thoughts (R,63). The false narratives about Jews disseminated by the Nazis in the West do not match the actions and intentions of the Jewish people he has come across in India.

Chakradhar's mental dilemma generating from the contrast between his own perception of Jewish people and the international antisemitic conspiracy theories he has heard is expressed through the rapid succession of conflicting thoughts. On the one hand, he can sense falsified elements in the widely circulated misinformation. On the other, some of the manipulative propagandist narratives cloud his judgement:

[W]e were also told that the last World War had dragged on for four years because of their greed. They were accused of having stage-

managed the impending war too. Europe, we were told, would burn because of the vindictiveness of the rich Jews. England's enmity with Russia, the possibility of America entering the war, the conflict in Palestine with the Arab Muslims, all this led back to the Jews. (R,63-64)

Chakradhar then goes on to question whether the categorization of the 'other' shifts from one ethnic group to the other. He wonders if the Nazi hatred towards Jews will ever be directed towards other ethnic groups, or whether other nations, inspired by the Nazi ideology, will begin to target their own ethnic minorities. This shifting categorization of the other is dangerous, as any minority identity group may be vulnerable to the fear of persecution at any time. Here, it is worth keeping in mind that both Bedekar and his protagonist are from India, a place renowned for its incorporation of diverse heterogeneous minorities. Any religious, racial, or political discord would inauspiciously rupture the social multicultural fabric of their nation, severely altering its plural identity especially during the tumultuous transition from the colonial to the postcolonial. This context is important to develop a comprehensive understanding of Chakradhar's anxious rumination.

Bearing close resemblances with Mufti's views on *Baumgartner's Bombay* as expressed in *Enlightenment in the Colony*, Chakradhar's revelations connect Jewish minority crisis in Europe with the then forthcoming crisis in India in the following passage. Bolstering the arguments of the thesis, Bedekar's text connotes the possibility that the persecutions of minorities in modern majoritarian states all over the world connect different histories of trauma:

What if the same philosophy of anti-Semitism were to spread to other countries, what then? ... Are Hindu groups and organizations going to kill all the non-Hindus so that none remain with our borders? Is that the goal? Can that be a goal of any religion? (R,64-65)

We see this as Chakradhar's focus on contemporary German antisemitism briefly diverts to his concerns about the colonial reality in India. The general perpetration of violence and the alarmingly increasing tendency to equate Nationalism with irrational aggression becomes a major concern for him which is strikingly reflected in the following excerpt:

There are so many communities and classes of people are compradors, people who do not want freedom to come. The foreign rulers protect them

today for their own selfish motives. Once this protection is removed, what happens to the sins they commit today? Will they be remembered tomorrow? Or must we simply admit that as time goes on, these volcanoes of hatred will keep erupting? If we're thinking of Nationalism as revenge, if this becomes rooted in our history as a way of thinking, what becomes of man's evolution? I shudder to think. (R,65)

The harmless, benign Jewish refugees he encounters on the ship do not seem to pose any threat to their nation, and yet they have been discarded from the body politic. The antisemitism of the Nazi despots has breached the social contract between the state and these former German citizens, seizing their right to existence.

To an outsider such as Chakradhar, the ordinariness of these Jewish refugees does not go unnoticed. It provides a counter-narrative to the vitriolic antisemitic propaganda of the Nazis, causing Chakradhar ask a number of pertinent questions:

But here was this ordinary Jew standing in front of me. What was his crime? Why was he being punished? Was the need of the nation greater than the needs of the individuals who compose it?
(R,65)

The repeated questions not only communicate a strong sense of urgency, they are effective at stirring the readers' emotions. Here, Bedekar's stylistic strategy is intended to arouse the reader's moral indignation. Taking into account the Nazi antisemitic measures against the Jews, Chakradhar returns to the point he has raised in relation to the horrifying possibilities of religious and racial harmony being destroyed by the politics of segregation. He understands the power of the Nazi ideology in annihilating values of inclusion and diversity across the world. He is aware that the Nazis are capable of permanently shaping world politics, instigating other national, racial or religious majorities to subjugate, vilify, and exterminate their minorities. He continues:

Jews had been persecuted for centuries. Only this time, it had taken on a new and more ominous form as the Germans turned their efficiency towards the goal of extermination. Would this be repeated in the history of other countries? Muslims had once conquered and

then made India their home. Parsis had arrived in India, escaping religious persecution, and after being turned away they had been accepted conditionally. The Nazi philosophy seemed to see the Nation as an Avenging Angel, flaming sword in hand, righting wrongs that might be real or imagined. (*R*,66)

Bedekar's sincere and compelling arguments offer a powerful critique of race-thinking, religion, and the modern nation-states. The rhetoric of Bedekar's writing aptly portrays the menacing political developments in the West before his Indian readers and its robustness invokes in them a disturbing fear for the future. Through the powerful metaphor of nation as an avenging angel, Bedekar expresses his anxiety about the weaponization of the nation by the Nazi majority in order to ensure systematic marginalization and vilification of the minorities. Bedekar's trepidations rendered through Chakradhar's introspection also reflect his suspicion of contemporary race and religious thinking. The unfortunate escalation of political hostility aided and abetted by pseudo racial and religious perversion would soon prove him right in his observations. The world would witness in the next few years how the all-powerful totalitarian Nazi apparatus would sinisterly politicize race and religion and effectuate the 'final solution'.

Many of Chakradhar's fears, disclosed through the long internal monologue, will rapidly materialise against the backdrop of increasingly aggressive global political developments. First and foremost, the Nazis will target, apart from the Jews, many other ethnic and religious groups, namely the Roma, Slavic and Sinti people, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Secondly, the Hindus in India will soon massacre and be massacred by the Muslims population during the infamous partition of 1947. Majoritarian identity groups will either subjugate the minorities or engage in direct conflict with them driven by racist and religious nationalism. Considering the year the novel was written in, it is remarkable to see how prophetic Chakradhar's concerns are and how accurately these translate into realities in the course of the next ten years.

Intersections of racism of the period are especially highlighted in the breakfast scene in Naples, when Chakradhar is subjected to racial discrimination by an Italian waiter onboard. Chakradhar gets into a row with the waiter who serves other customers but pays no attention to Chakradhar's order. When Chakradhar firmly asks for his porridge, the waiter hurls racist remarks at him: 'Go sit at that table... This table is reserved for white people. Blacks like you are over there' (*R*,69). Upon hearing this, Chakradhar loses his calm, grabs the waiter by his

shirt, and reprimands him harshly. Everyone's attention shifts to the row, including Herta's. Chakradhar catches Herta staring at him "with something like respect." (R,70) This incident leads to the reconciliation between Herta and Chakradhar. The fact that Chakradhar stands up to the rude, arrogant waiter, a representative of the white, Christian Europe that has rejected Herta's kind, brings a smile to her face.

Juxtaposed with the growing attraction between Herta and Chakradhar (whom she calls Bob) is the precariousness of the situation for the Jewish refugees. When Herta and Chakradhar get off from the ship to explore Naples together with Dr. Shinde and the Hermann couple, Herta and the Hermanns are unable to partake in the usual tourist activities in the city because of their limited financial resources. They refrain from buying food at a fancy restaurant, and Herta places a handkerchief over her eyes so that she cannot see the enticing shop window displays. '... [T]he car hire had exhausted their budgets and [they] could not spend anymore' (R,74). Despite being surrounded by the beauty of the city perched below the magnificent Mount Vesuvius, there are limits to their enjoyment. With increasing intimacy between the two on the deck, the relationship between Herta and Chakradhar progresses at a rapid speed which astounds both of them. Chakradhar is taken by the 'straightforward, simple, innocent, uninhibited' nature of their relationship (R,87). And yet, for Herta, the suddenness and the intensity of this relationship are more complicated, implicated with her sense of displacement and unreality. She tells Chakradhar, 'This is so sudden... Whatever it is, you'll have to handle it. I can't' (R,87). She is aware of the therapeutic potential of Chakradhar's company in her life. Within two days of escaping 'a life of persecution and horror in Germany', she admits to feeling 'exhomed, reborn into light and fresh air' (R,88). The transformative power of love soothes the pain she has experienced in Europe. Thus, she yields to her physical and emotional desires, overtly displaying her affection on the deck with little attention to public opinion. Yet, something is not quite stable about this relationship, partly because of the pace with which it progresses and the stark differences in Herta and Chakradhar's respective backgrounds and characters.

While Herta uses the relationship to escape, Chakradhar is perturbed by the uncertainty of their bond. He wonders if Herta is just another example of his casual flings and if her memories might fade into oblivion after the journey's end, without exercising any lasting impact on him. He resolves to let her down gently: 'I would warn her that we could not marry' (R,93). Part of Chakradhar's scepticism towards Herta stems from past experience, but

most is from a very realistic awareness of the rapidly changing time they belong to, and the stark difference in their lives and backgrounds.

At times, some of Chakradhar's questions are purposefully insensitive in a bid to sabotage the relationship. For example, he asks Herta if she likes Hitler (*R*, 119). Nevertheless, considering his position as a non-European outsider with limited knowledge of contemporary malevolence against European Jewry, Chakradhar's lack of awareness, reactions and curiosity could seem understandable. Although pogroms against the German Jews took place well before 1939, many were not to be publicized widely until the end of WWII. Furthermore, the systematic mass murder of the Holocaust had not yet happened. Chakradhar's primary sources of knowledge in this domain are the oral accounts of Herta, Keitel, and the rest of his fellow European Jewish travellers. The development of Chakradhar's relationship with Herta runs in parallel with his gradually gaining a deeper awareness about the plight of the Jews.

In the next section of the chapter, Herta's escapism into the love affair becomes more pronounced, highlighting her desire to evade reality. All her attention is concentrated on their next destination, Port Said. The ship had previously connected the Jewish refugees with Naples, creating a space marked and transformed by their Jewish presence. But from Port Said the creation of such space gets thwarted due to strict immigration laws. Reality strikes Herta again, forcing her to accept her status as a stateless person helpless before historical forces. On the other hand, in both Naples and Port Said, Chakradhar learns about the different facets of the condition of Jewish exile, gaining deeper insights into its nuances. Near the beginning of this section, the ship approaches Port Said, causing a flurry of excitement among the passengers weary with cabin fever. Some of the elderly Jewish passengers are delighted at the prospect of being near the Jewish holy land of Palestine. Chakradhar has a conversation with Keitel which suddenly foregrounds the challenges faced by refugees. Chakradhar catches Keitel engrossed in examining the world map. Studying the map, for Keitel, is primarily an act of optimism; it is a symbol of a new beginning free from the historical baggage he carries. It is about finding a new geographical place that will provide him with opportunities and accommodation. But many of the countries willing to accommodate these refugees are not necessarily ideal for them. The unbearable heat of tropical countries like Egypt and India is a serious issue, especially for elderly people like Herta's mother. Keitel also notes, 'Tropical weather means buying new clothes. Where's the money to come from? (*R*, 99)' It leads Chakradhar to realize the actual condition of exile. He admits,

Suddenly he [Keitel] had made it real for me: how much a refugee must deal with, what he must consider when deciding on a new life. Truly, it was not as easy as I had thought. To settle down somewhere, to worry, to live in poverty... (R,99)

The voyage nevertheless is also an opportunity for optimism for those Jewish refugees, and a chance to reconnect with people, something that they were deprived of in Germany. Chakradhar observes, 'It seemed as if the Jews were intent on savouring every happy moment, trying to extract every last joy of the present.' (R,102) Herta, in particular, thoroughly savours the thought of merry-making in Port Said after a prolonged period of exclusion in Germany. Having acquired her lost luggage at last, wears fancy clothes and makes a mental list of all the things she wants do with Chakradhar in the city. Like many other fellow Jewish travellers, Herta believes the arrival at Port Said will signify freedom and equality. It marks her entry into the East, a safe space free from exclusionist and disparaging antisemitic politics of Nazi Germany that will allow her to experience happiness again. Hence, she tells Chakradhar, 'Let's get down at Port Said. I have what it takes to be happy. And I'm ready for some happiness.' (R,110)

It is a happiness that is nevertheless showed with disappointment. When the ship arrives at Port Said, the refugees are faced once more with restrictions as Jews, this time by British law outside India. As the passengers try eagerly to get off and reach the land by the launches, Chakradhar learns that Jewish refugees are not being permitted to enter the city as Jewish migration to Palestine was strictly limited by the British authorities in line with the White Paper of 1939. When confronted by Chakradhar, one of the immigration officers firmly replies, 'I'm sorry, sir, but German Jews are not allowed on these shores', leaving him fuming (R,115). In this section, Bedekar briefly touches upon the Arab-Jewish conflict over Palestine through a conversation between representatives of these two ethno-religious groups.

'But what is our sin? You won't even let us go ashore?'

'Who will guarantee that you will return?' asked the Arab.

Where do you think we'll go?

'Who knows? You lot are refugees. You could sneak off anywhere.

You'll take shelter where you find it. What if you enter Palestine?'

They were silent and then someone said angrily: 'We are no outsiders to Palestine. Historically it was the home of the Jews.'

The Arab laughed sarcastically and shrugged. ‘Really? That must have been before my time. All I know is that today Palestine belongs to the Arabs.’ (R,116)

The unforeseen setback, together with this overheard conversation, directs Chakradhar’s thoughts to Herta. He fears that this disappointment will cause her tremendous anguish and ‘all the suppressed rage might explode into some form of madness’ (R,117). When he spots Herta on the deck, he offers his solidarity and support to her, but Herta is deeply disturbed. In Chakradhar’s company, she started feeling alive, seen, and loved again and it helped her forget her persecution. But the incident at Port Said mentally transposes her back to the horrors of Germany, inciting traumatic memories that she shares with Chakradhar.

The fourth chapter of the novel is an account of Herta’s pre-exilic life in Germany under the Nazi rule narrated in third person by Chakradhar. The purpose of this chapter is to acquaint Bedekar’s Indian readers with the context and horror of Jewish persecution in Germany by providing Herta’s socio-political and personal background. Rajendra Dingle considers this short section to be ‘a hermeneutic achievement of extraordinary quality’ which presents ‘a sensitive picturization of the deadly atmosphere of fear in Fascist Germany and the travails and tribulations of the Jews on the run...’³ According to Dingle, Chakradhar in this chapter re-imagines himself as Herta and ‘relieves her immediate wretched past’ on her behalf.⁴ The deftness with which Bedekar represents Jewish life in Germany under the Nazi rule in as early as 1939 is indeed commendable. For an Indian to explore through fiction the complex Jewish question and foreground the perils of Jewish exile during a time when his own country was immersed in the politics of a national liberation struggle is unprecedented. What prompts Herta to share her story with Chakradhar is the ring on her finger which she had received from her German lover Karl Franz. The ring engraved with Karl’s initials epitomizes a happy time of her life shortly before the disintegration sets in. Chapter four starts with Herta and her mother’s departure from the Third Reich as a result of this disintegration of Jewish life. It opens with a scene at a German railway station from where the Milan Express is about to leave. While most people boarding the train are regular travellers, there are ‘fifteen to twenty passengers [who] will not be allowed to return’ (R,124). Herta and her seventy-five-year-old indisposed mother are among this unfortunate group. Being Jewish, Herta and her mother must travel in a third-class carriage, segregated from the ‘Aryans’. Here, a porter hands Herta a note signed by her non-Jewish lover Karl which gets confiscated by a Nazi guard a few

minutes later. The content of the unread note makes her feel nervous about Karl's fate as 'the declaration forbidding German Christians to have any relations with Jews' is already in place (R,127). A few minutes prior to the departure, she spots Karl at a bookstall and alerts him about his letter being held by the Gestapo. The fear of the consequence mars 'their last precious moments together' and they part for life without being able to bid a proper farewell to each other. (R,127)

On the Milan Express, the narrative briefly shifts its focus from Herta to other Jewish passengers having similar fates. First appears 'about fifty years old, tall, balding' Keitel who has been dismissed from employment due to his Jewish origin (R,131). We further learn that Keitel's 'savings had been seized by the government' and now 'he was being forced to reinvent himself' (R,130). We then get a glimpse of Frau and Herr Hermann 'sitting in a close embrace', unfazed by Keitel's entry into their compartment (R,131). The husband keeps feeding the wife from a loaf without paying heed to Keitel's presence. Ironically, this Jewish couple is able to show mutual affection only in the pursuit of exile. Here, this chapter takes the opportunity to importantly raise the issue concerning Jewish loss of privacy amidst the Nazi antisemitic measures:

Even a married couple would find it difficult to find moments in which to be intimate. How could they? They had lost their homes. Hotels and restaurants and theatres were closed to them. Only the gardens and the streets remained and even there, they faced restrictions. (R,132)

From here, the narrative pans to Herta's old mother, sitting alone in another compartment shivering from cold air. Burdened with age, she seems to be the only person impervious to the forced displacement from Germany. A woman in her mid-seventies, she is aware of her impending end, and it matters little to her 'where one's grave is dug' (R,132). When Keitel tries to open the overhead vent for the circulation of warm air for her comfort, she stops him saying, 'No, don't. Perhaps we are not allowed. Perhaps warm air is only for the Nazis' (R,132). The old woman's bearing reveals that she has become resigned to the Nazi measures against Jews. A conversation between her and Keitel ensues after he offers her some food. They discuss Nazi antisemitic legislation, thus informing the readers about the recent decrees banning Jews from various public spaces. Later in the night, she suffers from severe stomach pain, but she fears to walk past the railway official to the bathroom at the end of the carriage.

Herta is pained to see her mother's agony, fearing the worst may befall her at the very start of their exile. In this state of utter helplessness, she has suicidal thoughts, taking her back to the memories of the life she is leaving behind.

The depiction shows how the Nazis subject Herta to a gradual stripping of rights, identity, property, and interpersonal relationships. Stories of unprecedented antisemitic measures start intruding her everyday reality. The Nazis target her house in a suburban Jewish neighbourhood and set it ablaze. 'Stones were thrown, windows collapsed in heaps of glass, doors stripped' (R,134). Although she narrowly escapes the assault through the backdoor, the house does not survive. With helplessness and rage, Herta witnesses the house reducing to rubble as no aid from the fire-brigade arrives. Jewish houses are marked. Jewish employees are discarded from jobs. Official decrees regulate Jewish life across the nation. Strict restrictions are imposed on Jewish movements, trampling upon Jewish sense of belonging in Germany. It is only a matter of time before Herta, too, is dismissed from her job. In this grim situation, Herta falls back on her lover Karl, the only remaining beam of hope in her life. However, the induction of Nuremberg Race Law in 1935 further impedes Jewish assimilation, creating a rift between them. Their mutual love becomes a target of this legislation and consequently suffers a rapid decline. On the night the order is passed, Herta reflects on the relationship sadly admitting that her presence in Karl's life will jeopardize his well-being. At the same time, she is aware of what it means for herself:

Have I lost him?... His embrace? His protection? Must I lose the only truthful thing in my life? Must I lose my only place of refuge? Then what is left for me? (R,139)

Except for Karl, there is no other support network to help Herta survive the brutalities of the Nazi regime. The exclusion of Jews from German society is carried out with so much efficiency that all her yearnings for attention, love, and care go unnoticed:

... no one spoke to her; no one even noticed her existence. Sometimes she would wonder, 'Have I evaporated? Am I walking around without a body?' (R,140)

The transition from an assimilated and rightful German citizen to an invisible nobody is too disheartening a reality for Herta to accept. This experience has a shattering impact on her mental and physical health. The Nazi destruction of Herta's family home and the lack of

private space leads to a distressing suppression of feelings which lead to the first signs of madness and suicidal thoughts. But staring at her own reflection in the mirror inside a tube station brings Herta back to her senses. In a nation which has ruthlessly destroyed her shelter, her livelihood, and her love life, her body is still hers, and hers alone. Whatever agency she is left with involves her own 'five-and-a-half-feet' of flesh and blood. Committing suicide will only mean parting with her last possession, and surrendering to the totalitarian regime. The reflection of her body in the mirror leads Herta to identify with her past self once again and helps her to resist thoughts of self- destruction. Thus ends the fourth chapter of the novel.

In the fifth chapter, the author explores the theme of transnational reach of anti-Semitism influenced by Germany's right-wing nationalism. He sheds light on how acceptance of bias works and shows the perils of bystanders. The scene shifts back to the ship, after the disastrous day at Port Said. During breakfast, Chakradhar learns from Keitel about the aid sent by the local Jewish community for the travelling European Jewish refugees. The help consists mostly of old, pre-worn clothes and twenty five Indian rupees giving everyone a share of 'about a rupee and twelve annas' (R,146). This gesture of goodwill prompts the Indian travellers onboard to consider the possibility of fund-raising for the refugees. But the discussion soon descends into dissent when one of the Indian men, Yogeshwar Mandal, refuses to contribute saying, 'I have no wish to help traitors.' (R,147) Having spent a couple of years in the Third Reich, Mandal is prejudiced against Jews, his perception of them is negatively influenced by the conspiracy theories disseminated in post-World War I Germany. Similar to many German nationals with pro-Nazi sympathies, Mandal holds Jews responsible for Germany's defeat in WWI. The argument shifts from the Jews in Germany to the Indian freedom struggle and the question of minorities in India, leading Mannan, the Indian Muslim man trying to pursue Herta, and Michael to engage in a heated exchange with Mandal. Through this commotion, we are able to recognise Mandal as a Hindu right-wing extremist who expresses his contempt towards non-dominant identity groups. His insinuation that Indian minorities will be subjected to the treatment similar to Jews in Nazi Germany 'if they don't come to their senses' is a telling signal of what is going to unfold within the next decade during the Indian partition of 1947 (R,150). Amidst the fuss, the noble intention with which the discussion began in the first place, yields no result. A disturbed Chakradhar remarks,

The idea of helping the Jews was stillborn. It seemed as if it were a European War and we could not be bothered about it. I didn't think so. If Europe were ablaze, Hindustan would burn too. If the Jews were in

trouble, so would we be. It was with this disquieting thought that I fell asleep... (R,152)

While most Indian passengers fail to grasp the destabilizing capacity of contemporary European socio-political developments, Chakradhar has the foresight to surmise its far-reaching impacts in India, and by extension, in the world. In a few years' time, the war in Europe will wreak havoc on the Indian economy, causing a deadly famine in Bengal in 1943. Many Indian soldiers will be sucked into the war, fighting and losing lives for the British army against the Axis forces on different fronts; many European Jewish exiles will seek refuge in the Indian subcontinent to escape annihilation; the Nazi persecution of Jews will generate the darkest episode of the twentieth century.

Other examples in the novel indicate the complicated facets of Indo-Jewish relations as they play out on the ship. Bedekar depicts instances of selfless love and benevolence, for example, when two Indian men treat a sick Jewish child with whom they have no personal ties. But the very next moment, he inscribes a darker side of Indo-Jewish encounters as well. There is an announcement for mandatory vaccination against cholera and smallpox for the passengers travelling to Shanghai. The unforeseen expense incurred by the vaccines leaves many Jewish passengers in a difficult situation. In this circumstance, some of the Indian travellers try to take advantage of the female refugees, exploiting their grave financial situation.

Ultimately, the potential of a true Indo-Jewish alliance between Chakradhar and Herta is doomed to fail. And one wonders if Bedekar implies realism or pessimism? Towards the end of the journey, Chakradhar's mistrust towards love makes marriage seem impossible. Mumbai approaches speedily, producing a multitude of emotions in the passengers. Everyone gathers on the deck. Photographs are taken as souvenirs. Mannan, deeply in love with Herta, tries to pose with her while Herta wants a 'photograph taken of just you (Chakradhar) and me' (R,164). Mannan's friends encourage him in his advances but Herta does not comply. Chakradhar reflects,

A Jewish girl in love with a Hindu; a Muslim is drawn to her. If I married her, every meal she ate in my home would be alien corn. If she married him, she would have the same problems with the lifestyle and the food. At her age, she would be set in her ways. Her behaviour was different, her expectations too. Whatever home she found, she would

have to work hard to adjust to the new atmosphere, the new habits and patterns of the family. (*R*,164-165)

Chakradhar may be right to some extent. Assimilation into a new culture is always a challenge, especially when one is arriving with a pre-existing historical trauma. But for Herta, the difficulty of settling in India is far less daunting than the prospect of a life without her lover, Chakradhar. She breaks down, ‘burying her face in her mother’s lap’, lamenting the imminent loss of love (*R*,168). When Herta learns that the ship will reach Mumbai the next morning, she is heartbroken. Herta’s silence seems to convey her desperate plea to be drawn into her mother’s body, ‘But take me back now into your womb’ for ‘I cannot bear even the touch of the faintest breeze in this cruel world’ (*R*,168). However, in a few hours, Herta recovers her strength, puts on a white silk dress, and asks Chakradhar to meet her on the deck at night. Together, they indulge in drinks, waltz, and swimming before parting for the night. But after some hesitation, Herta makes up her mind and revisits Chakradhar in his cabin ‘in a state of abject surrender’ (*R*,195). Undressing herself, she says to Chakradhar:

I know what you’ll say...What will people say? Which people are you talking about, my dear? The Germans? The Egyptians? The Indians? None of them have room for me. You have a world waiting for you, with its friends and its moralities. I am a non-person to them. I have no people, so whose morality do I follow? (*R*,189)

And then she collapses on the ground from stress, anguish, and grief. The prolonged experiencing of rejection from multiple fronts propels Herta into this state of uninhibited candour. Here, Bedekar seems to suggest that state-sponsored persecution, loss of identity, and the misfortune of being branded a non-person by the society and the state translate to Herta’s apathy towards ethical concerns. Morality, to an extent, is connected to one’s sense of belonging and rootedness in a specific community or a place. But such a feeling evades Herta because of her forced divorce from the fatherland and the consequent refugee crisis she has to endure. The act of undressing, therefore, symbolizes her reciprocal rejection of normative social, moral, and cultural practices which comes as a consequence of her being rejected by modern nation-states.

The last chapter delineates the catastrophic impacts of political and racial war on the innocents by foregrounding three letters Herta addresses to Chakradhar after their separation. The purpose of these letters is to show Herta’s reactions to their forced parting, the

declaration of war, and the helplessness of individuals in the face of historical adversity. They also proffer information on other Indian and Jewish travellers. For example, from the first letter, we learn of Dr. Shinde's wishes to adopt Louis, and even take up his mother's responsibility, and Keitel's despair after Chakradhar's departure. We also find out about Mannan's desires to marry Herta. But what takes us by surprise is the revelation about a marriage proposal Herta received from Chakradhar on the day of their separation, as recorded in her second letter: 'At dawn, you woke me up and brought me to the deck and said, "Herta, I am going to marry you"' (R,201). But the outbreak of war proves to be 'the obituary of our dreams', eradicating all possibilities of a marriage between the two (R,197). Herta is now seen as a threat to the British authorities due to her German identity, and, by extension of the same flawed logic, she becomes an enemy of Chakradhar who is a subject of the British Empire. The letters become the medium through which Herta channels her anger and bafflement at the absurd complexity of the political aggression of the time. According to Rajendra Dingle, these letters also capture 'Herta's changing consciousness which is becoming more and more political.'⁵ Their content explores the position of Jews in the war between England and Germany, problematizes the definition and category of traitors, and emphasized on the importance of female resistance to destructive totalitarian rulers and governments. The third letter with which the novel concludes ends on an ominous note, foreshadowing Herta's tragic suicide:

I want you, Bob.

But I cannot have you.

I am done for. (R,210)

Thus ends the text.

The ocean-liners carrying Jewish refugees from Nazi Europe to other parts of the world may be considered as a setting characterized by the curious blend of 'places' and 'non-places' as defined by French anthropologist Marc Augé. According to Augé's exposition, 'If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or not concerned with identity will be a non-place.'⁶

Examples of non-places include but are not limited to airports, bus-depots, railway stations et al, thereby, making any spaces that a traveller occupies the 'archetype of non-place.'⁷ Within a non-place associated with travel, a travelling person loses all constituents of their identity

except for their role as the traveller. Herta's experience on the ship must be cited here as an example. During a certain period in the course of her travel on the ship, Herta lets go of her identity as a victim of Nazi antisemitism, and embraces a carefree persona absorbing the joy of travel. But non-place, Augé argues, interdicts the creation of 'singular identity' and 'relations' and only generates a sense of 'solitude' and 'similitude'.⁸ Instead of history, non-place is marked by 'the urgency of the present moment', the predominance of the now.⁹ Although the importance of the present in Herta and Chakradhar's union is undeniable, especially because of the limit of time imposed on their togetherness, it is their respective histories that shape their relationship and determine their future. The ship they are travelling on is not secluded from their histories, and it also provides its passengers with abundant opportunities to foster meaningful relations with fellow travellers. There is a shared feeling of 'similitude' in the sense that everyone onboard is a traveller, but the journey soon reveals their diverse background, identities, and characteristics, and interestingly these differences are accommodated during the course of travel. These contrasting points suggest why the ship should be understood both as a place and non-place.

Ranaangan may come across as an ambivalent text at times. On one hand, the novel fiercely portrays the dehumanizing treatment of Jews at the hands of the Nazis and shows sympathetic understanding towards their plight of exile. On the other hand, in the early chapters it uncritically contains antisemitic slurs such as the legend which blamed the Jews for the defeat of Germany in the First World War. One might also argue that in some instances the text gives the impression of being anti-Muslim in spite of showing awareness of the dangers of majority/minority conflicts in different regions of the modern nation-states. Dr. Shinde who shows sympathy towards the Jews is a Hindu nationalist who vows to destroy anyone wanting to change India's primary Hindu identity. It is also essential to mention the original ending of the novel in this regard. Bedekar's original draft featured the avaricious war-monger Abdul Latif (who Chakradhar had met earlier on the train from Paris to Genoa) boarding the ship from Philippines's capital Manila after Chakradhar and Herta's parting. His actions on the ship would directly instigate Herta's suicide, casting a shadow of anti-Muslim prejudice in the novel. The publisher of the novel advised against such an ending to which Bedekar eventually agreed.¹⁰ These are the reasons why Anna Guttman finds *Ranaangan* to be 'fascinating and simultaneously troubling...', its 'simultaneous embrace and disavowal of anti-Semitism, and its explicit linking of the "Jewish problem" to the "minority problem" in India' being the 'most salient features' of the text.¹¹ However, its ambivalent nature brings

out the true essence of interracial, interreligious, and intercultural encounters in a time of global disorder. In order to create a microcosm of the modern heterogeneous world in 1939 with its problems and contested ideologies (of which the novelist, too, was a part), it was imperative for Bedekar to depict individuals with diverse, conflicting, and even questionable perspectives with their problematic utterances.

Ranaangan may be a short novel, but the issues examined within its purview are of immense importance. From an elaborate and vivid portrayal of the contemporary Nazi oppression of the Jews and the consequent Jewish refugee crisis to a brief reference to what now denotes the modern Israel-Palestine conflict, a depiction of Hindu-Muslim tension among the Indians, a critique of contemporary nationalist fervour prevalent in various nations including India, a presentation of what Michael Rothberg would later call the multidirectional understanding of traumatic historical episodes irrespective of national or ethnic identities – Vishram Bedekar explores a number of key social, political, and inter/national problems throughout the text. Most of these issues would carry over to the twenty-first century, plaguing and shaping the course of national and international politics to a great extent. While some aspects of the text may indeed appear troubling, Bedekar's vivid novel about Jewish persecution and exile during the Nazi regime with multiple references to other pressing global concerns as early as 1939 is an exceptional achievement.

Chapter 3: Alex Aronson's *Brief Chronicles of the Time*

Introduction

One of the major episodes in the history of Indian and Jewish encounters, Jewish migration to the Indian sub-continent between 1930s and 1960s forms a crucial, but rather under-examined aspect of the social, cultural and political history of WWII and its connections with un/divided India. Existing records suggest that in an era that imposed strict immigration laws all over the world, around 2000 central European Jews sought refuge in India to escape what Jawaharlal Nehru called 'an intense form of racial intolerance and race war.'¹ Yet, not many accounts of Jewish refugee life in India written by the refugees themselves exist. Alex Aronson, a German Jew, was a renowned personality among the Jewish refugees who recorded his lived experiences in India in his memoir *Brief Chronicles of the Time*. The translator and scholar of Indo-German cultural relations Martin Kämpchen writes that Aronson 'was one of a fairly small group of Jewish refugees in India which contributed to the cultural life of its country of exile.'²

Near the beginning of the essay, 'We Refugees', which was first published in the Jewish periodical *The Menorah Journal* in 1943, Hannah Arendt discusses the difference between the two terms 'immigrants' and 'refugees'. For Jews, the term 'immigrant' or 'newcomer' carried positive connotation of having free will and agency over one's choices. It was the term Jewish expatriates preferred to use to define themselves. The reason behind this preference had a lot to do with how the other term, 'refugee', was perceived before the rise of Adolf Hitler and the subsequent persecution of European Jewry on an unprecedented scale. Earlier, a refugee was seen to be an individual who sought refuge because they had committed certain acts or had subscribed to certain political opinions. But, Arendt writes,

... we committed no acts and most of us never dreamt of having any radical political opinion. With us, the meaning of the term "refugee" has changed. Now "refugees" are those of us who have been so unfortunate as to arrive in a new country without any means...³

The change had so massive an impact that in the mid-twentieth century, the idea of being a European Jew became almost equivalent to the idea of being a refugee. The transformation began to be felt as soon as Hitler seized power on the 30th of January, 1933 and set the stage for making Germany *judenrein*, a country rid of all Jews. As a response, a considerable number of the German Jewry, including Aronson, left the Third Reich for other countries in spite of having limited resources and opportunities.

Alex Aronson was born in 1912 in the German town of Breslau, which later became a part of Polish territory and was renamed Wroclaw. Aronson's parents held Russian citizenship before relocating to Germany which Aronson considered to be 'the country of emancipation and progress' amidst a growing resentment towards Jews in Tsarist Russia.⁴ Organized pogroms raping and murdering Jews breaking out in the Pale of Settlement — the extensive area in Western Russia within which permanent Jewish settlements were strictly restricted — were commonplace. Therewithal, extreme poverty, limited professional opportunities and hard, humiliating living conditions forced Jews to immigrate from the Russian Empire to other countries. Jonathan Dekel-Chen explains, 'The first great waves of migration of Jews from Eastern Europe, the politicization of the Jewish masses, together with the rise of the Zionist movement took place against the background of the pogroms.'⁵

The fact that the Aronson family could immigrate to Germany and start over in spite of the antisemitic undercurrents in contemporary European politics brings to mind Sigmund Freud's arguments in the essay 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death' published in 1915. Freud argues that before the outbreak of the First World War, it was still believed that there existed a unity among the civilized nations and the concept of foreigner and the concept of enemy were not merged into one. As a result, 'countless men and women have exchanged their native home for a foreign one' as 'anyone... could create for himself... a new and wider fatherland, in which he could move about without hindrance or suspicion.'⁶ This illusion, Freud goes on to explain, was shattered by the onslaught of WWI causing severe anguish in the non-combatant section of society. The violence unleashed by the First World War exposed the failure of Enlightenment values and the ostensible moral superiority of the European nation states. Furthermore, witnessing fellow citizens resort to an unprecedented scale of barbarity had devastating impact on civilians. The Aronsons were no exceptions. Alex Aronson's father, a businessman, remained in Russia during the war while Alex's mother stayed on in Germany with two children. They, too, eventually left for their home country under the threat of internment as Russian citizens. (*ST*, 25-28)

Aronson's childhood, thus largely determined by the turbulence of the time, was fraught with displacements 'from West to East, and then back again from East to West according to the fortunes of war' (ST,25) . When Aronson was six years old, he acquired Lithuanian citizenship and got resettled in Germany where he found himself engulfed by the inscrutable perplexities of what he calls 'linguistic schizophrenia' (ST, 32). His linguistic inheritance of Russian and German languages meant he had two mother tongues. At that point, Russian, the language spoken at home, seemed to him to be the language of 'war, exile, destitution, violence, and sudden death.' (ST, 32) Ironically, on the other hand, German language symbolized 'order, discipline, a hierarchy of values that was beyond criticism.' (ST, 32) Private tutors were hired to provide lessons in French and Hebrew. A voracious reader by nature, Aronson also devoted his time to the reading of Greco-Roman and modern classics. His grasp of European literature, ranging from Plato to Eliot, would begin to get firmer from around this time. The strong presence of what T.S. Eliot defines as 'historical sense' in 'Tradition and Individual Talent' (1919) which would pervade Aronson writings decades later had its roots in these early readings.

While young Aronson was settling into his life in Germany and was engrossed in the pursuit of languages and literature, his acquired fatherland began to show signs of a sinister political upheaval which would bring new dangers for the Jewish population. In 1919, after having served in the Bavarian Army in WW I, Adolf Hitler became a member of the right-wing German Workers' Party or DAP (*Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*). Hitler assumed leadership of the party in 1923 and it was renamed National Socialist German Workers' Party, or the Nazi Party. In the same year, Hitler was arrested for an attempted coup d'état in Munich. During his nine-month-long imprisonment at Landsberg, Hitler produced much of the first volume of *Mein Kampf*, which foreshadowed the fate of Jews in Germany under the rule of the Fuehrer. Hitler's antisemitic Nazi ideology drew heavily upon the conspiracy theories such as the betrayal of the Jews and the stab in the back legend in interwar Germany. Following Germany's defeat in the First World War and the humiliating sanctions imposed on the country by the Treaty of Versailles (1919), a large section of German Society shifted the blame of loss on the Jews which resulted in an unprecedented surge in German antisemitism. An early sign of this was the political assassination of Walther Rathenau, Germany's Foreign Minister, in 1922. Hitler's antisemitism was becoming increasingly extreme, indicating an ardent desire to remove all Jews from Germany. Exploiting the zeitgeist of the late 1920s and early 1930s, his party won 230 mandates- the highest in the house- and Hitler was designated

as the Chancellor of the Third Republic in 1933. Disintegration of the state began shortly after the takeover with assaults against Jews starting to erupt from as early as 9th March, 1933.

Aronson's stay in the country was thwarted overnight. He left Germany on 1st April, 1933, the day Nazi leader Julius Streicher led a state-sanctioned one-day boycott of Jewish shops and businesses formulated by Joseph Goebbels. Less than a week later, Hitler's government, legalized by the Enabling Act of 1933, would also pass the Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service which authorized the curtailing of Jewish presence in different spheres of society. Aronson escaped to the south of France where he studied French and Comparative Literature in Montpellier and Toulouse. He completed his doctoral dissertation titled *Lessing et les Classiques Francaise* at the age of twenty-one before moving to England to take up undergraduate courses on English literature at Cambridge at the behest of his father. It is at Cambridge where Aronson heard of Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore and his 'ashrama' in Santiniketan from a Chinese scholar who had recently visited the place himself. (*BCT*,18-19)

Located in the then undivided rural Bengal, Santiniketan set off with an experimental school which advocated for the holistic development of an individual. Modelled on the ancient Vedic Tapoban (forest hermitage), Tagore's Bramhacharyashram, which turned into a cosmopolitan university in 1921, was arguably the first impactful attempt at decolonizing the contemporary educational landscape in India in an idyllic, quiet setting. It was a place of cultural communion, or as the motto of the university put it, '*Yatra Visvam Bhavatyekanidam,*' where the world makes a home in a single nest. Every year, Santiniketan welcomed international scholars, artists and thinkers to join its culturally diverse community so that a meaningful cultural exchange could take place. Through the infusion of internationalism and humanism in the daily landscape, it fostered a culture of intellectual diversity. The scholar advised Aronson to seek refuge in Santiniketan, Tagore's abode of peace, which he believed was 'paradise regained, a brave new world... free of all encumbrances of civilization.'*(BCT*,18) This meeting occurred in 1937. By this time, it was unthinkable for Aronson to return to Germany. As a persecuted Jew, it was also getting increasingly difficult for him to find suitable employment with a safe shelter elsewhere in Europe. Aronson was still living off the monthly allowance he received from his father, who by this time had moved to Palestine. Therefore, this chance encounter with the Chinese scholar (who remains unnamed in the text) carried hopeful implications.

Following his Chinese colleague's advice, Aronson wrote a letter to Rabindranath Tagore seeking a teaching position at Visva-Bharati University in Santiniketan and explaining his status as a German-Jewish refugee at Cambridge. The reply from Tagore's son Rathindranath bore positive news for Aronson. He was offered a lectureship at the English department of Visva-Bharati. To get an insight into the life that awaited him in Santiniketan, Aronson arranged meetings with two of Tagore's close acquaintances, Amiya Chakravarty and C.F. Andrews, who were then living in England. Poet and literary critic Amiya Chakravarty served as Rabindranath Tagore's literary secretary from 1924 to 1933 before embarking on his doctorate at Balliol College, Oxford, which he completed just before his meeting with Aronson. Anglican Priest and educator by profession and a social reformer by choice, Charles Freer Andrews supported the cause of Indian Independence and worked alongside Tagore towards the welfare of Visva-Bharati in the 1920s. Both Chakravarty and Andrews discussed the pros and cons of a life in Santiniketan with Aronson. There were still others, including his father, from whom Aronson sought words of advice before embarking on his odyssey to India. There were fair warnings against idealizing the Orient — its hot and humid weather conditions, the uncontrolled spread of typhoid and other diseases, and the considerably low wages were some of the most pressing concerns —and yet, none of them discouraged him. As Aronson notes, the novelist E.M. Forster sent him a postcard 'warning me against inflated expectations but advising me to go.' (BCT,22)

A ten-day voyage from Marseille on S.S. Stratnever brought him to the shores of Bombay and, after a few days' of sojourn in the city, he arrived in Santiniketan on 7th November, 1937 (29). What was supposed to have been an exercise in 'Lehrjahre' and 'Wanderjahre' (BCT,21) was then transformed into a nine-year-long refuge from the ravages of WWII and the Holocaust, and a vigorous participation in the socio-cultural atmosphere of colonial India. Aronson's nine years in Santiniketan and Dhaka led to the genesis of his memoir *Brief Chronicles of the Time* which he would publish in almost half a century later in 1990. *Brief Chronicles of the Time* is an extremely important historical document not only to understand and analyse the experiences of a Jewish refugee in contemporary India, but also to widen the transnational impact of the Holocaust and bring India into the ambit of Jewish exile studies, an area which has so far eluded it. A mediator between the West and the East throughout his life, Aronson challenges the stereotypical East/West dichotomy in his memoir by foregrounding real-life, factual encounters between Indians under colonial subjugation and persecuted European Jewish refugees on the ground.

Santiniketan

On first impression, Santiniketan seemed to exist outside the realm of Aronson's normative understanding of time. The daily routine in the ashrama appeared to have favoured a different temporal perception which seemingly considered transience to be 'an absurd human invention' (*BCT*,35). The markers of modern Western civilization such as swift communication, transportation, medical facilities, the urban hustle and bustle, and materialistic comfort were manifestly absent in the ashrama. The primitive calm and silence of rural Bengal stood in stark contrast with Aronson's previous experiences across different learning centres in Europe. Aronson's initial impression of Santiniketan resembles the quintessential Western outlook towards the East although later on it takes on a somewhat ambivalent form. The distinction between the occident and orient materializes in its most rudimentary form in the description of his accommodation. Aronson was lodged at the university guest house upon his arrival. Most amenities of the Western civilization were still unthinkable in the humble setting of Santiniketan. With his room came the most basics of furniture- a bed, a table, a couple of chairs and a bookshelf. Water was available only from a small reservoir built behind the room. Shower, bathtub or running water was still an unaffordable luxury.

To young Aronson, Santiniketan was the manifestation of the raw, untamed East with its spiritual, humanist potential to offer respite from a past sullied by the West, its austere environment a great opportunity for him to 'cultivate the art of forgetfulness' (*BCT*,36). The entirety of Aronson's stay in Santiniketan, as per his own admission, was tinged with an ever-present feeling of survivor's guilt. The sense of embarrassment and guilt of having escaped and survived the Holocaust while the majority of European Jewry was being torn apart never left him during his exile in India. Decades later, the pangs of it were still so intense that he compared himself with Roman Emperor Nero and remarked, 'I cannot help asking myself whether I was not fiddling while Rome burned' (*BCT*,53). The calm of rural Bengal did ensure his physical safety and well-being, but it could not always provide relief from the mental trauma of persecution, displacement and guilt. However, the full extent of the Holocaust was not widely known until 1944/45. Given Aronson's relative isolation in Santiniketan, some of this narrative may be a retrospective addition with the benefit of hindsight.

The university administration placed considerable emphasis on acculturation and assimilation from the start. Aronson received specific instructions to dress in Indian attire, partake of Indian food, learn Bengali language and familiarise himself with local tradition and practices. Aronson's self-fashioning in India was therefore determined by the university to an extent, but there were occasional instances of nonconformity when the 'liberal upbringing and idealist premises that had brought me here' came into direct conflict with the customs of the ashrama (*BCT*,37). Aronson took his stay in Santiniketan to be a quest for the ideal. He explored the place searching for 'signs of human perfection' in people, in buildings and in nature. While Aronson found the residents to be temperamentally warm and welcoming, the untamed, open nature, which lay at the core of Santiniketan's essence and consciousness, was a disruptive force for him. He personifies nature as a 'violent' entity that lacked 'benevolence and kindness' (*BCT*,38). Meanderings in the pebbled plain of Khoyai under the dark, cloudy sky stripped him of the pride of human coherence and significance. His accounts of scorching summers with dry and hot north-western wind, rattling thunderstorms with frequent flashes of lightning, heavy monsoons or the lack thereof causing floods and famines, fatal outbreaks of cholera and smallpox provide a counter narrative against the highly romanticized Tagorean perception of nature.

Aronson viewed his arrival in Bengal as a 'pilgrimage' to seek the ethos of humanism in the art of poetry and often he drew parallels between his passage to Tagore's Santiniketan and Rilke's visit to Tolstoy in Yasnaya Polyana. Therefore, Aronson's first meeting with Tagore, which took place two weeks after he had reached Santiniketan, was in his own words 'an event of considerable significance' (*BCT*,41). Aronson was taken to an air-conditioned room decked with books and flowers where the poet was sitting in an armchair. Tagore's dignified and poised face, warm eyes, and controlled movements invoked a feeling of 'respect and admiration' in Aronson (*BCT*,40). The conversation revolved around English poetry and its pedagogy. Tagore's emphasis on the teaching of Romantic poetry, and in particular that of Shelley, conflicted with Aronson's modern sensibilities leaning towards the theoretical position of his Cambridge professor and literary critic F.R. Leavis, but he 'chose polite silence' over argument and made no attempt at convincing Tagore otherwise in his first meeting with him (*BCT*,40). Aronson could sense the difference between his and Tagore's literary orientations from the start- the former espousing the thematically modern and criticism-centred trends of contemporary literature, while the latter dedicated to the sagacity of 'humility', 'faith' and the 'ultimate goodness of human nature' which then seemed

considerably out of fashion for the West (*BCT*,41). And yet, he found Tagore rather impressive; his advocacy for ‘complete simplicity of form and content’ in which life and poetry were to be integrally connected betrayed his inherent, unshakable faith in the liberal humanist tradition he was inspired by (*BCT*,41).

Tagore’s Santiniketan simultaneously contributed to the process of decolonization and resisted the nationalist fervour in contemporary Indian society. Since it emerged as one of the most prominent sites for cultural exchange between India and the world in the twentieth century Bengal, scholars, artists, philosophers, religious and political leaders, and social reformers from across the orient and the occident came and enriched the multicultural milieu of Santiniketan. The liberal, cosmopolitan environment of Visva-Bharati allowed Aronson to encounter innumerable individuals from different races and religions within the premises of the ashrama. Many of them were renowned intellectuals and public figures, some were great source of amusement for Aronson, some others were peculiar in disposition, and a few of them had ulterior motives behind their visits. Upon his arrival, Aronson befriended two Englishmen who were heavily influenced by René Guénon, a French author who, disenchanted with the Western notion of ‘progress’ in both humanities and science, converted to Islam and relocated to North Africa. Discussions on and comparative analyses of world religions and their holy scriptures amidst a growing disillusionment with the contemporary Western Christian world were part of the everyday intellectual exercise for the three of them. After their departure, Aronson was acquainted with a South Indian economist who was appointed as a lecturer at the university. However, the association was short-lived as the lecturer’s nightly misconduct in the dining hall soon led to his premature exit from Santiniketan. During this time, proponents of diverse religions and faiths thronged in Santiniketan with an intention to proliferate the number of followers through conversions. Aronson met one of the most prominent preachers of the Bahá’í movement Martha Root who delivered a speech on the eminence of her faith at Visva-Bharati. The content of her talk, much to Aronson’s disappointment, seemed ‘an unwarranted interference of “white” cultural and religious values’ which, according to him, was irrelevant and out-of-place in the multi-religious fabric of India (*BCT*,45). Root’s presentation appeared to be an attempt at undermining the ‘simple and naive faith of my students’ to which he took serious offence (*BCT*,45).

Aronson was assigned the enormous responsibility of establishing ‘some order’ (*BCT*,55) in the archive of Rabindra-Bhavan, the Tagore research centre at Visva-Bharati, by

Rabindranath's son Rathindranath Tagore. Aronson was quick to recognize the scholarly value of 'the magnitude of literary treasure' which was then haphazardly stored in 'the basement of the palatial building he [Tagore] inhabited' (*BCT*,55). The archive comprised of 'numerous files of correspondence, thousands of letters addressed to Tagore in a variety of languages, and even more newspaper cuttings...' (*BCT*,55). This undertaking introduced him to a multitude of printed and hand-written materials relating to Tagore's reception in the West after his Nobel Prize win in 1913. Aronson's in-depth analyses of the extensive newspaper reportage resulted in the publication of his first book *Rabindranath through Western Eyes* (1943) which earned him both reputation and repudiation in Bengal. While his work was hailed by the young Bengali poets, 'it was accused of bad taste by the literary establishment' (*BCT*,59). The strong criticism he received from the likes of Amiya Chakravarty and Amal Home had a lot to do with their misunderstanding of Aronson's true intent. *Rabindranath through Western Eyes* was meant to be an inquiry into the general public interest in Tagore in the West through a critical assessment of newspaper reports. According to Aronson's understanding, and this is true to a great extent, popular Western preoccupation with Tagore often had more to do with his 'eastern' mystic look and powerful public lectures and less to do with his literary genius. His 'oriental', sage-like appearance with long beard and long loose robe exuded the aura of a great prophet who, in the Western public imagination, seemed to have come to deliver the war-ravaged Europe from evil. It was also a major source of controversy in subsequent years. Aronson notes, as a consequence Tagore's initial popularity, his 'political innocence', like many other aspects of his life and career, came under the scrutiny of the Western press and intellectuals and was blown out of proportion (*BCT*,57). It was this side of the western response to Tagore that Aronson was interested in while putting together the manuscript of *Rabindranath through Western Eyes*. The book, therefore, in Aronson's own admission, was not an exercise in 'hero-worship (to which Indians are particularly given)', but was primarily a book 'about the West' focusing on its attitude, its bias, its exploitation, its misunderstanding, and its criticism of Tagore, and displayed 'a novel approach to literary criticism in terms of critical (or uncritical) response.'⁷

A European Jew himself, Aronson regarded the implication of escaping the devastating fate of six million European Jews in mid-twentieth century as an equivalent to circumventing historical time. Time and again he compares his life in Santiniketan to Thomas Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain*, published in 1924, which describes an elite society of dreamers and intellectuals who consider themselves to be far above reality. The preoccupation with time

and its passage is a common leitmotif in both Mann's *The Magic Mountain* and Aronson's *Brief Chronicles* (it is interesting to note the latter's conscious use of the word 'time' in the title). Like Hans Castorp, the protagonist of Mann's novel, Aronson arrives in Santiniketan for a brief adventure, but ends up staying in the magic mountain for seven years. The magic mountain of Santiniketan 'was not merely a refuge but a fortress built against the vicissitudes of historical time and its unalterable forms of devastation' (*BCT*,54). Tagore's university town did not only serve as an asylum for escaping Nazi atrocities, but it also shielded Aronson from the harsh conditions of exile. Moreover, apart from the sporadic presence of a few hovering 'flying fortresses' and occasional newspaper reportage on different fronts, there were no visible signs or aching reminders of the devastation and disintegration Europe was suffering from. His position atop the 'magic mountain' thus creates a rift between his immediate surroundings which fostered ideal and unrestrained conditions for peace, creativity, and contemplation and the relentless barbarity, abject poverty, and increasing chaos playing out in 'the plains' (*BCT*,54).

Alex Aronson's Internment

With the declaration of the Second World War in Europe, Aronson, a German Jew, became, by default, an enemy alien in the eyes of the British Empire. Hannah Arendt writes, '...contemporary history has created a new kind of human beings — the kind that are put in concentration camps by their foes and in internment camps by their friends.'⁸ Likewise, one week before the start of war, Aronson was made aware of his impending internment by an Anglo-Indian police officer who would later escort him, along with two armed personnel, to Fort William, Calcutta where a camp for the enemy aliens was set up. The news ruptured his life of contemplation and seclusion in Santiniketan, throwing him into the turmoil of historical time that he had eluded so far. In a country that was then gaining momentum towards its struggle for independence from the British rule, Aronson's apprehension for his future in the internment camp did not initially receive much attention. Failing to anticipate the humanitarian catastrophe that would be caused by the Nazis over the course of the war, some of his friends saw a hopeful outcome for India in the event of German victory over the Allied forces and thought Aronson was merely a 'pawn' in the grand scheme of things (*BCT*,69). To them, 'I had become a person of symbolic significance, standing as it were, in the eye of the storm, personifying history in the making' (*BCT*,69). Such attitude hints at a

problematic lack of understanding towards Aronson's subject position as a German Jew in the 1920s and 1930s Europe, the peripatetic existence that was forced on him by its conflicting nation-states, and the trauma that came with that experience.

On the day of Aronson's departure from Santiniketan to Fort William, the ashrama community, which predominantly indulged in the pursuit of poetry, music, and art, and often denied the external historical reality in the process, could grasp the gravity of his predicament with more profundity. It was evident in the 'silent and solemn procession of students and teachers' that followed the policemen to his bungalow (*BCT*,70). For Aronson, the cortège was almost comparable to that of a 'funeral march'. Aronson was asked to 'pack a few of my belongings' after which he was taken to the nearest railway station (*BCT*,70). Reflecting on the incident in a post-Holocaust reality staggeringly reveals its chilling similarities with what was happening to the European Jews around the same timeframe. In a similar, although more violent manner, Jewish families were being rounded up by the armed forces, i.e. the Gestapo, and were being deported either to the Eastern European ghettos or concentration camps by rail. Something similar was playing out, as it were, across different geographical borders. While the factors of race and religion were imposing unprecedented restrictions on them in Europe, the factor of nationality inflicted new challenges on them in British overseas territory including in India.

During the journey, in spite of his apparent frustration and resentment towards internment, Aronson was engulfed by a sense of certitude for the first time in a long time. He writes, 'After the tension of the last few weeks, I looked forward to the barbed wire enclosures as an escape from the uncertainty of a false peace' (*BCT*,71). The pronouncement may seem counter-intuitive at first glance with its problematic association between optimistic anticipation and the term 'barbed wire' which would acquire loaded implications after Auschwitz. Philosopher and historian Reviel Netz argues in his book *Barbed Wire: An Ecology of Modernity*: 'The main feature of the political use of barbed wire was its asymmetry: on the one side an all-powerful government, on the other side a defeated, unarmed mass of people.'⁹ However, at that time, it was unimaginable for Aronson, who himself belonged to those 'unarmed mass' stripped of his agency by the authoritarian forces of the Empire, to foresee the horror and mass murder at Nazi concentration camps enclosed by barbed wires. Having been victimized by the tumult of war-torn Europe and the recurrent displacements from West to East and East to West throughout his life, the thought of confinement at the internment camp, regardless of its offensive and humiliating undertones,

provided Aronson with a paradoxical sense of stability. In the enclosed area of the camp surrounded by barbed wires, he found a much-coveted certainty. Locating consistency in the unstable became his coping mechanism. A careful reading of this section also finds traces of a covert surrender to fate, but it comes without any fear or trepidation. (*BCT*,71)

By the time Aronson arrived at the camp, around two hundred enemy aliens were held in captivity in thirty five tents. Among them, there were sixty-seventy supporters of the Nazi Party and the Jews were being forced to live in the camps in their proximity. Moreover, historian Joseph Cronin holds, '[colonial authorities] routinely used Nazi racial terminology – "Aryan" and "non-Aryan"- specifically to differentiate between Jewish and non-Jewish Germans'¹⁰ which showed their willingness to deploy Nazi nomenclature to classify the Jewish refugees. His Jewishness did not absolve him of his national identity as a German, therefore any attempt to exemplify his position as a non-threatening, complying refugee to the commander went in vain. Aronson was given accommodation in a tent with five Jewish inmates towards whom he seemed indifferent but empathetic. Unable to rationally comprehend his circumstances, Aronson writes, rather indignantly, 'Being the first victim of the Nazi regime I was outraged by the absurdity of my being interned as a potential fifth columnist and a danger to the British in their war against the Germans.' (*BCT*,72)

The memoir is an important document to historicize the way of life in internment camps in British India. It provides remarkable insight into the dynamics and the regimented conditions that prevailed within the camp. Aronson notes the emphasis on making the bed according to military standards. To ensure the utmost impeccability, the camp commander inspected every tent while carrying out the roll-call in the morning. He had special reverence towards the Nazis in the camp who, according to him, excelled in the art of bed-making. His interaction with Jews was non-existent as 'he wasn't quite sure what to make of them' (*BCT*,73).

Alongside providing an account of his experiences and the condition of Jewish refugees in the internment camp, Aronson's memoir reveals the disparaging attitude of the British soldiers towards India and Indians and their naive reverence towards the Germans. Aronson records the soldiers had all arrived from England, had a strong aversion to the French who were also interestingly their 'allies' in the war, and were quite akin to most Indians in terms of their indifferent outlook towards Jews. The source of the scant knowledge and awareness they had about Jews was Nazi propaganda. They held German culture in high esteem because it 'produced such supreme examples of human achievement as Marx, Einstein and Freud' (*BCT*,72). There was an incredulous response when they were informed all of the three

pioneers they admired were Jewish. Aronson was also accused of ‘racial prejudice’ when he referred to the ceremonial book burning campaign undertaken by German Student Union which targeted works by these stalwarts among others (*BCT,72*). It is interesting to note here that the memoir does not contain records of any interactions between the Jews and the Nazis in the camp in spite of his following remarks, published in the university newspaper in October 1939:

My position here is preposterous and unbearable. I have suffered so many humiliations at the hands of the German Nazis and yet I am detained with a whole crowd of them... It is for the first time since seven years that I’ve to live in intimate contact with Germans. This is more than any civilized person would bear.¹¹

Once during his thirty-days-long confinement at Fort William, Aronson faced a serious interrogation by Calcutta’s CID officers concerning his whereabouts before the war. Aronson’s associations with his Indian colleagues and acquaintances came under scrutiny in the process. Several weeks prior to the war, Aronson attended a tea-party, together with the then Indian National Congress President Subhas Chandra Bose and his brother, at Rathindranath Tagore’s Santiniketan house. Bose, known as one of the most prominent leaders of the Indian Independence Movement, shared a political alliance with Adolf Hitler in the interest of India’s liberation from their common enemy- Britain. This afternoon tea was responsible for the British suspicion towards Aronson, but he was able to convince the officers that ‘I was merely a silent witness to an encounter between two leading Indian politicians and the authorities of the Abode of Peace.’(*BCT,74*)

Within a month of Aronson's arrival at Fort William, the internees were shifted to a central internment camp in Ahmednagar. One night at the camp, the captives were violently awakened by a group of Gurkha soldiers and were escorted to a barrack. There was a rumour that ‘the British were going to shoot every tenth citizen.’ (*BCT,75*) Aronson's description of three hundred inmates crammed in a hall awaiting their fate in fear immediately connects a British internment camp in India to the horrors meted out to Jews in Nazi concentration camps in Europe. A British officer appeared and threatened them with ‘unspeakable horrors’ if ‘a pair of garden scissors was not immediately returned to him.’ (*BCT,75*) There was another instance of potential violence from a German missionary, who, after having spent forty years preaching the Gospel of Jesus in Assam, could not make sense of the political

chaos he was being forced to witness. His action of waking up from sleep and threatening other inmates with a knife held between his teeth seems innocuous in comparison to the violence threatened by the British officer. However, ‘the officer was drunk and was reprimanded by the camp authorities. We never saw him again.’ (*BCT*,75).

Aronson also foregrounds the hierarchy present within the Jewish refugees in the camp. They were divided into two categories- first class and second class. Belonging to the first class granted an exemption from work. While the first class refugees were served ‘fairly decent food’ in exchange of money, forced labour was imposed upon the second class prisoners. The latter were given two jobs to choose from:

- 1) carrying out the physically demanding task of moving bricks throughout the camp; or
 - 2) working as a waiter in the first class dining room and serving the first class refugees.
- Aronson himself served as a waiter which involved less toil and it also permitted him to have the same food as the first class refugees.

Not all enemy aliens in the internment camps shared a homogeneous political sentiment towards the Third Reich. Therefore, the fact that Jews and Germans were being interned together in a shared space aroused criticism from the Jewish inmates and various Jewish organizations. As a result, the colonial government launched an Aliens Advisory Committee, or Darling Commission in Ahmednagar to conduct individual background checks on the refugees and to closely examine their political inclinations. Headed by Malcolm Darling, a former governor of the Indian state of Punjab and a close friend of novelist E.M. Forster, the committee was responsible for Aronson’s release and subsequent return to Santiniketan.

Multidirectional Memory in *Brief Chronicles of the Time*

The application of Michael Rothberg’s multidirectional memory to analyse Aronson’s *Brief Chronicles of the Time* situates the text in the global socio-political context of the time. Along with representing the Nazi persecution of Jews in Europe, Aronson alludes to a number of key historical atrocities that were being committed within the same time frame. Breaking away from the traditional notion of the competitive nature of memory, Aronson recognizes the need to represent other atrocities alongside that of the Holocaust and exile. Instead of competing for the first position in the hierarchy of victimhood, Aronson shows deep

empathetic understanding towards other victims, forming partnerships with diverse peoples suffering divergent forms of historical despotism. References to Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia and Addis Ababa in 1936, the bombing of Guernica in the Spanish Civil War, the Nanjing Massacre of 1937 committed by the Japanese and the subsequent Sino-Japanese War from 1937 to 1945, the battle on the eastern front from 1941 to 1943 and the Bengal Famine of 1943 appear in the memoir. While some of these episodes are mentioned briefly in the text, others are presented in more detail. Aronson's dialogic engagement with different manifestations of historical violence at the time connects his own dilemmas with the universal narrative of trauma and victimhood.

In an attempt to conjoin the two seemingly different disciplines of Holocaust studies and postcolonial studies through his conceptualization of multidirectional memory, Rothberg offers three major arguments in his book *Multidirectional Memory*:

- Firstly, rejecting the idea of memory adhering to the zero-sum-game logic, Rothberg rethinks memory as a productive, multidirectional and dialogic exercise where different identity groups, regardless of their inherent diversity, share the form and content of memories.
- Secondly, Rothberg argues that collective memories of apparently different historic oppression and violence are not absolutely divorced from each other.
- Thirdly, Rothberg redefines the relationship between memory and identity, contending that their boundaries are not fixed and therefore, their relationship is markedly dynamic and open.

Although Rothberg primarily focuses on collective memory while formulating multidirectional memory, it is worth keeping in mind that the individuals are the building blocks of the collective, therefore, 'it [multidirectional memory] is never divorced from individuals and their biographies.'¹² The individual Aronson's acts of remembrance are shaped by his interactions and negotiations with that of the collectives and they are articulated within the socio-political framework of collective memory.

The last two years Aronson spent in Cambridge (1935-37) unfurled against the nefarious aggression and jingoism unleashed by the European nation-states and Japan which, within the next few years, would culminate in WWII. The hypocrisy of the ethics and values of Western civilization was being disconcertingly exposed by such political catastrophes. The impact of

these developments marked by multidirectional violence and bigotry would cause Tagore to fervently denounce his faith in Western civilization and its imitators in the East. Delivering his final public address titled 'Crisis in Civilization' during the celebration of his eightieth birthday in 1941, Tagore stated: 'The spirit of violence which perhaps lay dormant in the psychology of the West, has at last roused itself and desecrates the spirit of man.'¹³ This 'spirit of violence' reverberated throughout different continents turning itself into a catastrophe of unprecedented scale. Therefore, the ripples of its different manifestations cut across time and space and found articulations in Aronson's text.

Aronson refers to the massacre of Nanjing twice in the text. The first reference is brief, and it is mentioned, as it were, in the same breath as the Spanish Civil War and Mussolini's incursions into Eastern Africa in the very opening page of the book. He alludes to it for the second time while describing his encounter with an unnamed German visitor in Santiniketan. The scholar had arrived from China after having spent a few years studying and researching in the country. He had an album in his possession that contained vivid photographs taken in the time of the massacre. With unsparing details, the visuals represent the sheer magnitude of the devastation caused by the invading Japanese Army 'in a collective bout of insanity' (*BCT*,50). The subjects of these images comprised of starkly visual markers of disaster: piles of deceased and half-deceased men, destroyed buildings, abandoned streets, dead bodies floating down the Yangtze River and corpses of partially naked women sprawled on the streets. The collective release of violence hinged on insanity and irrationality. Reeking of war crimes and victimization, these photographs from the ravaged city of Nanking revealed to Aronson the contrast between his life in the magic mountain of Santiniketan and the historic violence occurring in China and all over the world.

The greater context of the Sino-Japanese War which was the continuing legacy of the Nanjing massacre appears in Aronson's description of renowned Chinese military leader Marshall Chiang Kai Check (original spelling Chiang Kai-Shek), and his wife's twenty-four-hour long visit to Santiniketan in 1940. Madame Chiang Kai Check presented a talk with an American accent which focused on the urgent need to end the ongoing political crisis in peace while the Major sat still on the stage in 'ominous silence' (*BCT*,49). His demeanour had a lot to do with the fact that Japan had already invaded large tracts of China, and he was leading a 'losing battle against the invaders' defending his motherland (49).

Aronson bore witness to the devastating impact of the Bengal Famine of 1943 during one of his visits to Kolkata. The famine claimed the lives of more than three million people who succumbed to extreme forms of starvation, malnutrition and poverty caused by ecological disasters and Winston Churchill's war-time colonial policies. This time, the misery of the human condition was no longer contained within photographs, but was unfurling in Aronson's close proximity. A mixed sense of perplexity, dread and empathy permeates his account of the famine. The mind-boggling sights of Kolkata, where peasants flocked from the neighbouring villages in a desperate search for sustenance, are rendered with hues of Realism and Naturalism. The war-time economic conditions had forced them into a brutally dehumanizing existence and they rummaged in the bins for discarded half-rotten food, often securing them after putting up fights with the stray dogs (*BCT*,68). Aronson juxtaposes the squalid experiences of the victims of hunger and poverty with the superfluous luxury of the allied soldiers who dined in well-lit restaurants and used the backrooms for the pursuit of sexual gratification (*BCT*,68). The glass pane of the window demarcated the reality into two distinct halves- one fraught with pangs of hunger that affected the fabric of interpersonal relationships and the dignity of human entity, the other marked by abundance and opulence. On one side, mothers, driven by extreme starvation, were tragically throttling their infants and beggars were lying on the streets covered in their own faeces. On the other side, piles of bread, tins of corn-beef and bottles of French wine were neatly stacked for indulgence (*BCT*,68). Such asymmetrical conditions transgressed borders, recalling the ghettos in Europe.

Friendship with Satyajit Ray

Aronson begins the sixth chapter of *Brief Chronicles* with what can be considered an empirical ethno-musicological analysis of the Bengalis, a community that he had lived with/in and observed from close quarters primarily in Santiniketan, but also in Kolkata and Dhaka during his nine-year-long exile. That he saw music as an integral part of the Bengali character and consciousness is evident from the opening paragraph of the chapter in which he remarks, 'Bengalis have music in their blood... They are naturally gifted with a sense of rhythm which accompanies and regulates their activities' (*BCT*,63). Aronson suggests that the practice of music in Bengal is not constrained by rules, regulations and hegemonic structures of the western classical compositions which, at times, also imparts a sense of

abrupt ending and incompleteness to the performances. Here, music is rather a free-flowing, unrestrained, and spontaneous expression of the self that requires little or no formal training and understanding. The primary objective here is not the attainment of perfection in terms of proper arrangement and mastering of notes, rhythms and patterns, but to underscore its gratifying and therapeutic qualities and to realize its potential to form and sustain human connections. It also holds true for the ashrama commune in Santiniketan in which singing of songs composed by Tagore, known in Bengali as Rabindra-sangeet, is instrumental in building a strong sense of collectivity among its culturally diverse residents. However, musical practices were not confined to Tagore's songs. Production, composition, and engagement with different forms of musical works- whether they were western or Indigenous, instrumental or vocal- are highly encouraged in Santiniketan. Music thus acts as a powerful bridge between 'the home' and 'the world', generating a true cosmopolitan environment in Tagore's forest hermitage, one that fosters lasting intercultural and interracial friendships, relationships and unity.

It was the shared affinity for western classical music that created an enduring bond between Aronson and renowned Indian film-maker Satyajit Ray. One afternoon, Ray, who was then a student at Kala-Bhavana, the department of Fine Arts at Visva-Bharati, walked into Aronson's bungalow with phonograph records. He played the records on Aronson's gramophone and the first piece they enjoyed listening together was 'Beethoven's op. 132' (*BCT*,65). The musical afternoon marked the start of a lasting connection between Aronson and Ray. Since then, they listened to many more records together and engaged in many conversations on music and its relation with literature and art, both in Santiniketan and in Kolkata, at Ray's mother's apartment. Aronson was impressed by Ray's deep knowledge of and admiration for both Indian and Western classical music. The fact that Ray would later on compose music for many of his films seemed very natural to Aronson. Ray's profound understanding of music, Aronson observes, is reflected in his unique interweaving of Indian and Western musical sensibilities in his compositions which aptly portrays the 'complexity of the encounter between European and Indian attitudes [...] Such musical symbiosis may then stress the concord or discord underlying such an encounter' (*BCT*,66).

Malaria Attacks

Upon his return from Ahmednagar, Aronson fell ill to recurrent bouts of malaria which attacked him every two days with ‘bewildering regularity’ (*BCT*,78). The tropical disease that his acquaintances in England had warned him against had a long-term detrimental impact on both his physical and mental well-being. It is interesting to note that, in his writing, Aronson treats malaria very much as a ‘disease of the East’; his European sensibilities are highly at work in his description of the attacks. It can be argued that Aronson’s depiction of malaria and its symptoms reflects typical trends in the Orientalist discourse. He presents his illness as a mystifying phenomenon which has a fiction-like quality to it. The paragraph leading to his account of the illness is fraught with references to several elements of a stereotypical oriental setting- bullock carts, monsoon rain, thunderstorms, swamped mango-groves, lightning-struck palm trees, snakes, mosquitoes all appear one after the other. Through all these details, Aronson carefully paints a picture of the untamed, underdeveloped, and unsophisticated East and its potential ‘dangers’ which builds up to the climax- the malaria attacks. During the peak of the fever, which began with biting chills and shiver, Aronson was severely perturbed by uncanny and terrifying visions. The visions were so vivid and powerful in nature that Aronson was still able to recall and describe those in detail more than fifty years later in his memoir. Some of the visions were bereft of any logic or rationality on the surface level- the domain of his unconscious was let loose, his imaginations were morbidly distorted; through some others, he relived some of the mournful sights and experiences he had already witnessed in India with unsparing details. However, in spite of the difference in their contents, all the six visions he recounts at length in the book share one strikingly common element — each of these visions is highly ‘oriental’ in essence.

The first vision mentioned in the text conjures a scene of lavish dinner at Sir David Ezra and Lady Rachel Ezra’s abode in Calcutta. The dining hall of the Ezra’s ‘palatial house’ with its glimmering candles, Venetian glass goblets, large cages with tropical birds dangling from the ceiling, and ‘uniformed, barefoot and dark-skinned bearers’ makes for a quintessential gothic setting around which the dream revolves (*BCT*,79). The sombre and ceremonial ambience of the room is all of a sudden imploded by the jarring screams and shrieks of the tropical birds. Western propriety and sophistication is immediately replaced by tropical chaos, confusion and cacophony. Aronson writes, ‘These shrieks echoed in my mind until the fever abated, but the birds’ eyes... continued to pursue me in my utter exhaustion, those unwavering eyes... full of hatred and malice’ (*BCT*,79).

Aronson's preoccupation with the thought of death and 'the process of dying' at that time is reflected in both his second and third vision (*BCT*,79). The second vision grows out of the fear of Japanese incursion in India when a few Japanese aircrafts dropped bombs on Calcutta and the rumours of Japanese army's imminent invasion of the country from the Burma-India border, deportation of India's white population and acts of tremendous mayhem and destruction were doing the rounds. Through the third vision, he relives the Hindu funerary rituals of one of his students with appallingly graphic details. He beholds in his imagination the corpse of the young boy being engulfed in blazing flames on the pyre. In both these visions, vultures are a recurring motif symbolising death and decay. The pervading smell of destruction and human death draws them near Aronson and they circle above him. The fourth vision betrays the blatant exploitation of the town's poverty-stricken people in the hands of a cunning Christian missionary whose charitable acts extend only to those willing to undergo conversion. In the fifth vision, Aronson's imaginary encounter with an Indian fortune-teller in his bungalow plays out before him. A very sceptical Aronson questions the prowess and authenticity of the soothsayer in the beginning. However, he is dismayed when the soothsayer correctly guesses the name of the flower he had asked Aronson to write secretly in a piece of paper. The final vision occurs during an evening at Tagore's son Rathindranath's residence- and this time it presents a distorted image of the immediate surroundings. The ceiling fan's rotations suddenly get faster; there appears a narrow pathway with stray dogs, almsmen demanding money, and a beggar in tatters; the bronze Buddha and the carved Madonna in the room come alive and start moving. When Aronson leaves for his bungalow, his own shadow starts following him down the street (*BCT*,83); The fact that he is followed by his own shadow is important, because it suggests that the danger/threat is not only located in the Orientalised 'other', but also in Aronson himself as the 'self' discovers itself as an 'other'. Then he envisions two shadows chasing him from behind. 'When they at last disappeared', writes Aronson, 'I was left alone with all those eyes, the leaving and the dead, the eyes of men and birds, unblinking and filled with hatred and malice' (*BCT*,84). The traumas of recurrent displacement, exile, internment and contemporary violence blend with the exhaustion of malaria and together, they rise to the surface in the form of apparently absurd, irrational, complex, and disconcerting visions.

Aronson found respite from the chills and attacks of malaria through the treatment of an unnamed doctor in Calcutta. In spite of his English degree and specialisation in tropical disease, the doctor emanates an aura of 'impenetrable enigma of oriental hocus-pocus one

generally associates with snake-charmers and half-naked holy men on the banks of the river Ganges' (*BCT*,84). He administers an injection in the middle of an attack and assures Aronson with all confidence that it is going to be the last attack. Aronson was sceptical, but his illness subsides after the injection. He compares the doctor's curing of his malaria with the exorcism of an evil spirit which shows his inclination to treat his recovery as a miracle; something which was only possible through the doctor's use of 'a secret combination of medical science and occult eastern conjuration' (*BCT*,84).

During his nine-year exile, Aronson also witnessed one of the saddest moments of mid-twentieth century India — Rabindranath Tagore's demise in August, 1941. His account of Tagore's illness, operation, death and last rites performed in Calcutta is often cited by Tagore scholars because of its historical significance. The account begins with Tagore's departure from Santiniketan for a minor surgery in Calcutta, his car being surrounded by the residents of ashrama, and his bidding farewell to his followers with a gesture of 'resignation and foreknowledge' (*BCT*,85). He documents the rapid deterioration of Tagore's health after the operation, his slipping into unconsciousness, the nation fearing the worst in sad anticipation and the universal admiration and reverence towards the poet reflected in the silent mass gathering outside his Jorasanko abode. In awe of the public appeal of Tagore, Aronson comments, 'However strange it may seem to a western mind, such universal appeal was taken for granted in Bengal and his death was not merely the extinction of a literary 'school' or age but the demise of all that was beautiful in mind and body and could never be resurrected back into life' (*BCT*,85). To Aronson, his death seemed to be the 'final consummation of poetry and music, a return to some ultimate silence' (*BCT*,85). When the news of Tagore's death was declared, the collective grief of the nation erupted into an unrestrained frenzy. Aronson claims that 'Millions attended the cremation' (*BCT*,86). The police were put in charge to mitigate the chaos and to control the neurotic mass but all attempts went in vain. People rushed to his pyre and rummaged through the remaining pile of woods to collect the remains of Tagore's dead body. In Aronson's words, 'It was a disconcerting, indeed a mind-boggling spectacle' (*BCT*,86). Tagore's ashes, preserved in an urn, were brought to Santiniketan. The ashrama community gathered around Tagore's house before which the urn was placed on a table. It was an unostentatious ceremony carried out in 'complete silence' (*BCT*,86). There was no fanatic display of bereavement, nor were there any 'eulogies' or 'funeral orations' (*BCT*,86). There was a shared understanding among the ashramites that pain of grief could only be expressed through a profound collective silence. A large brown dog then comes and

sits near the funeral urn. Aronson reflects on Tagore's moving relationship with this dog, and the poem that Tagore wrote about it, symbolizing his deep connection with nature. In this way, Alex Aronson, a young Jewish refugee from Nazi Europe, encompasses himself in one of the most significant historical moments of his host country in the twentieth century.

Dhaka and Departure from India

After a prolonged stay in Santiniketan, Aronson realized, amidst an atmosphere of increasing political turmoil both in the East and the West, it was time for him to 'descend from my ivory tower' and relocate to a city to take on the 'whirlpool of academic competition' (*BCT*,98). Aronson's expired German passport imposed serious restrictions on his movements, so his inevitable first choice was Calcutta, a bustling city only a couple of hundred kilometres away from Santiniketan. Aronson visited a number of colleges and universities in Calcutta in search of suitable academic positions but even after multiple applications and several meetings with the 'party bosses' whose names dominated contemporary newspaper articles, he did not receive any offer of employment in the city (*BCT*,98). The frustration of a futile job-hunt made him briefly consider, for a change, a life of hermit in the Himalayas which he had visited three times on vacations. Following a painful period of professional rejections and disquiet, an opportunity eventually arose at the English Department at Dhaka University (spelt Dacca in Aronson's *BCT*), and, after a successful interview for the post in Calcutta, Aronson left for the eastern part of still undivided Bengal in 1944 for his new employment.

It is in Dhaka where Aronson felt the turbulence of contemporary politics in day-to-day affairs for the first time since his departure from Europe in 1937. He refers to it as a 'bleak city' where university buildings were turned into makeshift hospitals. The cityscape was fraught with a very visible presence of the Allied army, comprised of both soldiers from the British Commonwealth nations and the US military, who dominated the streets in jeeps and trucks. As a German Jew in a Muslim majority city caught in the politics of war and nationalist movements, Aronson was asked to join a defence committee formed in anticipation of possible attacks against the whites, but he did not encounter any religious or racial hostility during his stay. Rather, he enjoyed great popularity among the students, partly because of his scholarly excellence and previous employment at Tagore Visva-Bharati, and partly because of the fact that 'there were no other "white" teachers employed at Dacca

University.’ (BCT,104) Aronson records the temperamental difference between his Dhaka and Santiniketan students — the former more questioning, practical and painfully aware of the socio-political injustices of the day while the latter primarily concerned with the cultivation of arts and aesthetics.

Aronson’s lectures at the university were also occasionally attended by the US soldiers who, according to him, were quite akin to his university students. He remarks, ‘... they [the US soldiers] were equally eager to learn’ more about ‘the world they were fighting for, the reasons why western culture was worth preserving and the sort of people they were supposed to defend against the encroachment of various authoritarian regimes’ (BCT,104-105).

Aronson, a German-Jewish refugee in undivided India, connected the US soldiers with his Dhaka University students by acting as a mediating link between these two like-minded groups. Soon, his bungalow began to be frequented by groups of ‘Bengali Muslim students and American soldiers, both black and white’ who participated in mutually productive discussions on a range of topics over ‘endless cups of tea’ (BCT,105). The bungalow became a site of transcultural encounters where ‘exchanges of ideas in an atmosphere of curiosity and tolerant affirmation’ became commonplace (BCT,105). But the meetings, carried out with the noblest intent, garnered the attention of a suspicious CID – the British police did not like these friendly encounters – and were discontinued following its warnings: ‘The American soldiers were duly investigated and warned’ (BCT,105).

Aronson’s ties with the US soldiers were not completely severed after this incident. He received an invitation to deliver a talk on the modern British novel at the US airbase on the outskirts of Dhaka where he was warmly welcomed by these soldiers who ‘had been starved of any intellectual stimulus’ (BCT,105). As a token of gratitude, they brought him food from the PX stores and ‘largely unread’ books from the camp (BCT,105). The ‘largely unread’ is a telling detail suggesting that most of these men did not read any books, and therefore that their reception of his lectures might have been quite limited. The most positive outcome of his visits to the US airbase is that he acquires a first edition of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (BCT,106).

When the War came to an end, the US airbase became defunct, and the soldiers were either sent home or were transferred elsewhere. But more importantly, ominous signs of the Indian partition began to creep in, and with that, the political identity of his university students became more pronounced. It was also around this time when Aronson made up his mind to

return to his ‘real home’, Palestine, where his family had relocated before the Holocaust (*BCT*,107). It is worth noting that the sentence implies that Aronson regards Palestine as his ‘real home’ only because his family/parents live there; and he adds that ‘My decision to leave [India] was bound to no ideological principles’ (*BCT*,107).

Before departing from Dhaka, he had to obtain a ‘laissez-passer’ that authorized international travel in absence of a valid passport, and an official ‘entrance permit to Palestine (*BCT*,107-8). Aronson travelled to Bombay from Dhaka via Calcutta, where he came to know about his father’s sudden demise through a cable. Following a ten days’ stay in Bombay, he went to Karachi and embarked on a Lydda bound BOAC flight in the hope of a life free from the fear of exile and execution. It is notable that Aronson's cosmopolitan encounters are (sadly) over now. He describes WWII as a time when ‘unbridled nationalist lunacy had covered the earth’ (*BCT*,108). After 1945, although WWII had ended, nevertheless, forms of ‘nationalist lunacy’ still persisted, and were as dangerous as ever. Indeed, in the new post-war reality, ethnic and national affiliations are reaffirmed yet again, for reasons of political expediency. The memoir ends on a bittersweet and ambivalent note, as Aronson abandons his cosmopolitan wanderings and ‘returns to the fold’ of ethnic affiliation (108).

Although Aronson left India to settle in what is now the state of Israel, he maintained connections with his host country through epistolary exchanges and academic works. After all, India did provide him with a shelter from the Holocaust and Aronson’s gratitude towards his country of refuge remained intact till the end. From Santiniketan to Dhaka, Kolkata to Ahmednagar, Mumbai to the Himalayas – Aronson created Jewish spaces through his travels all over the pre-partition subcontinent during the course of his exile. His Jewish identity and presence added another layer to the country’s multicultural history and his stay in different parts of the undivided subcontinent challenged the stereotype of the wandering Jew whose presence threatens social stability. By largely assimilating in his host country India, Aronson shows the Jewish ability to connect with a place and culture in spite of many challenges faced by a refugee. Bolstering Meerzon’s arguments on the positive connotations of exile, Aronson’s creative contributions suggest his productive participation in Indian social and cultural spheres. Aronson’s teaching at Visva-Bharati and Dhaka University, his invaluable work at the Rabindra-Bhavana archive, his books on Tagore— all testify to how the experience of exile can positively transform and nurture an individual alleviating the pain of separation from the homeland. However, at the same time, his act of leaving India connotes a

want in his sense of belonging in the host country. Since the memoir was published forty-three years after his departure from India, representation of the factors that led him to seek permanent settlement in Palestine shortly before the Indian partition has been mediated to an extent. While Aronson's family had a significant role to play towards his decision, it might not be too wrong to surmise that the growing intolerance towards minorities in contemporary India played its own part. It also buttresses many of the arguments such as the lack of belonging, the perils of being branded an enemy alien, the hazards of tropical weather, recognition of other traumatic episodes caused by the same evils manifested in different forms previously raised by Desai and Bedekar in *Baumgartner's Bombay* and *Ranaangan* respectively. By foregrounding both the positive and negative implications of his exile in India, Aronson underscores that Jewish exile experience is characterized by a sense of ambivalence that should be analysed in all its complexity.

Conclusion

What I have suggested through this thesis is the possibility of locating resonances between Indian history and the history of the Holocaust through Indo-Jewish transcultural encounters occurring in the mid-twentieth century. Through my analyses of Anita Desai's *Baumgartner's Bombay*, Jerry Pinto's English translation of Vishram Bedekar's Marathi novel *Ranaangan*, and Alex Aronson's *Brief Chronicles of the Time*, I have attempted to show that:

- i. Memories of traumatic events are not entirely contained within a particular identity group or any specific nation, and members of other ethnic groups can also actively commemorate and disseminate such memories through productive acts (for example, the act of writing as I have seen in this project).
- ii. The impact of the Holocaust is not restricted within the geographical boundaries of Europe and the Americas; therefore, decolonizing Holocaust studies is instrumental in carrying out a comprehensive study on the far-reaching global effects of the Shoah.
- iii. India and Indians are connected to the history of the Holocaust by the arrival of persecuted Jewish refugees from Nazi occupied Europe, their inclusion and assimilation in the host country and its culture, and their interactions with Indians inside and outside the sub-continent.
- iv. It is possible to locate parallels between postcolonialism and postcolonial Indian identity (especially the minority Muslim identity) and Holocaust studies and Jewish exile identity.

What is common in the three chosen texts is their focus on the phenomenon of Jewish dispersion and expulsion from the centre, i.e. Germany under the Nazi rule, and the subsequent experiencing of exile either in mainland Indian subcontinent, or during the course of journey from the West towards the East. All three texts portray Indian-Jewish transcultural encounters as a result of Jewish exile and proffer insights into different aspects of contemporary Indo-Jewish relations outside of Nazi-occupied Europe. These encounters become the medium through which histories, memories, and traumas are articulated,

exchanged, and even appropriated to an extent. Creative records and fictional reconstructions of these exchanges are informed by the potential to sensitize readers to the trauma of different forms of racial violence and genocide and build empathetic solidarity among diverse ethnicities (Rothberg). Research on this type of literature in the long run can increasingly encourage voices of dissent that will challenge tyranny and ethnic subjugation of any kind, ushering in a more just world where rights of minorities and the less powerful are recognized and valued.

Baumgartner's Bombay, Ranaangan, and Brief Chronicles of the Time foreground mainly two categories of people- Europe's internal other (in this case, Jews) and external other (in this case, Indians). Representatives of these two identity groups with their varying interests come together, connect, and even clash with each other, resulting in a fascinating interplay between different cultures. Diverse histories intersect in the life stories of the characters as they serve as the mediating links between Europe and India. Recurring references to totalitarian regime, ethnic cleansing, religious and political violence of the time articulated from different perspectives make these texts key literary materials to explore different histories in tandem, and establish connections between different identity groups. After all, Indians under the British colonial rule and Jews under the Nazi regime have been victimized by different manifestations of rapacious European imperialism to varying degrees. The links between the two phenomena help us reflect on the connection and constellation between Indian history and Jewish history, and postcolonialism and the study of antisemitism – two areas that remain largely under-examined even to this day. The texts also bring out the multifaceted nature of exile – at times, we see exilic experience providing opportunities for individual growth and survival. At other times, we notice exile imposing harsh conditions on individuals which propel them to a tragic end. A detailed and comprehensive study of these three texts underscores the nuances and ambivalence of the condition of exile even in India (a supposedly safe country for Jews) as faced by these Jewish refugees which require further analysis. Future research in this field could also consider Ruth Praver Jhabvala's essay 'Myself in India' and short story collection *My Nine Lives* which also explore the condition of Jewish exile and its links with India and Indians. In addition, Vikram Seth's *Two Lives* is another important text. Based on the true story of his great uncle and great aunt, it depicts the historical connectedness between Jews and Indians unfolding outside India in that period.

The three texts central to this project also elucidate on the affinities between acts of discrimination against and the marginalization of different minority communities across

borders. I have observed that non-Jewish Indian writers Desai and Bedekar find overt affinities between the questions of Jews as Europe's other and Muslims as India's other, exploring and problematizing the perception and condition of minorities in the modern state. Although Aronson himself refrains from commenting on the issue in his memoir, his act of leaving India for Palestine amidst the growing intolerance between Hindus and Muslims speaks volumes. According to Bryan Cheyette, 'New studies of antisemitism, with the work of postcolonialism in mind, understand the racial representations of Jews as a microcosm of broader historical concerns.'¹ It is also true for its reverse. Aamir R. Mufti's *Enlightenment in the Colony*, which informs the theoretical framework of my project, builds on the premise that 'the crisis of Muslim identity (in the sub-continent) must be understood in terms of the problematic of secularization and minority in post-Enlightenment liberal culture as a whole and therefore cannot be understood in isolation from the history of the so-called Jewish Question in modern Europe.'² As I have mentioned in Chapter 1, Mufti identifies the Jew as a universal figure of displacement and exclusion whose legacy provides an occasion to address issues of marginalization of the minorities even in non-Jewish nation-states such as un/divided India. From this perspective, Mufti explores the situation of Urdu authors such as Saadat Hasan Manto, who opposed and critiqued the Partition of India in 1947. Thus the 'Jewish question' has not gone away, it still informs the terms of contemporary debates about the status of minorities in the twenty-first century.

Twentieth-century texts that are generated as a consequence of contemporary Indian contacts with Jews and vice-versa, and deal with the solemn themes of the Nazi persecution of Jews, exile, and Indian Partition cannot but suggest the limitations of modern nation-states whose genesis and identity are predicated on violence against (or exclusion of) the 'other'. Among the various categories of the 'other', the nation's minorities- created by its own act of minoritization of certain sections of the populace- constitute a crucial part albeit their apparently innocuous position. That is the reason why the Jews were persecuted in Nazi Germany, Hindus were targeted in Pakistan, Muslims were abused in India, and so on.

Amidst this lingering tradition of the dominant culture's hostility towards its minor 'other', what role can Jewish studies and postcolonial studies jointly play to counter state-sponsored violence against vulnerable groups? Is it ever possible for minorities to attain a complete sense of belonging in an atmosphere coloured by majoritarian nationalist interests? How effective is differentiated solidarity as a strategy to end violence against the other and make negotiations between asymmetrical sides more equitable and egalitarian? These are highly

political questions which are decided by political processes. Yet literature and memoirs can enhance political debate, since they provide reflective spaces for nuanced discussion of political issues. Further academic research in this field is imperative in order to address these questions adequately.

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