



WOUNDED SELF IN ANITA DESAI'S *BAUMGARTNER'S BOMBAY*

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ABSTRACT

Individuals experience different forms of alienation such as “sense of powerlessness, meaninglessness, sense of fear and insecurity, social, cultural or self estrangement brought on by the lack of fit between individual needs or expectations and the social order.” This alienation could be universal and common to people all over the world. The present paper makes an attempt to study the cultural alienation that is caused by the problems of rootlessness, a sense of not-belonging and the issues involved in the conflicting cultures with reference to Anita Desai’s Baumgartner’s Bombay.

Keywords: *alienation, individual, rootless, self, cultural*

Alienation caused by the change of location and experienced by an individual who feels alien on a foreign land is a common theme in post-world war II fiction. The theme of conflict between east and west and the resultant feeling of rootlessness and sense of not-belonging leading to an individual’s alienation has been dealt with even by many Indian novelists in English. For example, Kamala Markandaya’s *The Nowhere Man*, Arun Joshi’s *The Foreigner* and Anita Desai’s *Bye-Bye Blackbird* and *Baumgartner’s Bombay* belong to the same category.

Highly individualistic, the characters in *Baumgartner’s Bombay* are trapped in by the hostile social, political forces that are beyond their control and the resultant psychological problems. They are affected by pre-war conditions in Germany, the aftermath of the war, the partition of India and the post-independence degradation of human and cultural values in India. Anita Desai reveals how these factors become responsible for the helplessness, frustration and the consequent feeling of social and cultural alienation of her characters. They represent the condition of modern man, who according to Edmund Fuller

“... suffers not only from war persecution, famine and ruin, but from inner problem ... a conviction of isolation, randomness, meaninglessness in his way of existence.”(Fuller, 3)

In the present section, an attempt is made to analyze Hugo, his quest and journey and the hostile social, political and psychological forces which severely affect his life and make him feel rootless. The seven chapters of the novel are alternately focused on the past and the present of the alienated German Hugo Baumgartner.

“Accepting but not accepted; that was the story of his life – the one thread that ran through it all.” (Desai, 20)

Miles away from his native land, he keeps on struggling for better existence, but fail miserably. Even after his long stay in India, he can never be in the mainstream of the Indian Life.

The novel opens with Hugo Baumgartner, a German Jew living out his final years in loneliness. He has been in India for fifty years. Hostile social and political forces in Germany have forced him to come to India, where he thought he would be happy, but his desire remained unfulfilled. He nurses and loves his cats which are his only companions. While looking back into the past life of Baumgartner, we understand that his father, a rich furniture dealer was forcefully taken to Dachau the place of punishment to the Jews.

“... It happened very quickly, very efficiently – the police car drew up at the curb, stilling its honking hooter, the storm troopers in brown walked in, simply lifter Herr Baumgartner off his chair and carried him out...” (Desai, 43)

He was humiliated and severely tortured there. Returning after a fortnight from Dachau, he died leaving Hugo and his mother all alone. Destiny brought Hugo to India. Being a foreigner, he had no link with Indian social and cultural activities. Consequently, he felt rootless in an alien country.

With Chimanlal’s help Hugo has done timber business in Calcutta. When the war broke out Hugo is arrested and taken to the internment camp, where the “hostile aliens” like him from all over the country were imprisoned. Hugo is there for six years. The lonely prison life threw Hugo in a state of isolation and gradually has sucked his life spirit and made him more alienated. In the camp Baumgartner has never shared his feelings with others while other prisoners have done it, and in the company of others they used to forget their miseries and agonies.

“While Baumgartner watched and marveled at this gift for passing on or even shedding whatever was burdensome: it seemed to him he shed nothing, that – like a mournful turtle – he carried everything with him; perhaps it was the only way he knew to remain himself.” (Desai, 109)

After his release from the prison, he has met his old friend, Habibullah and began his timber business. It is the time when the tension between the Hindus and Muslims is prevalent. Adverse circumstances made Habibullah give up his business.

Hugo Baumgartner, Lotte, Julius Roth, Lily and Kurt who have made India their home; but for one reason or another, they cannot do so. They cannot mingle with the main stream of Indian social and cultural life. Hugo is the main sufferer in the novel. The annihilating attacks on Hugo’s self started early in his childhood. He is denied of the pleasures of childhood. He desired keenly to accompany his father to the races, but it is rudely trampled by his father. Being a Jew, he was denied the pleasures in outside world. Once in a Christmas party at school, students were offered Christmas gifts sent by their parents. But neither Hugo nor his parents are aware of this thing. When the other children are being given the gifts sent by their parents, Hugo felt cut off from other children. His mind is filled with shame. Anita Desai describes accurately:

“Then the agony was over and he could collapse into the dark ditch of shame. What was the shame? The sense that he did not belong to the picture-book world of the fir tree, the gifts and the celebration” (Desai, 36)

The passage reveals Hugo’s sense of not-belonging to other children of the school and its consequences on his tender mind.

Hugo’s problem is that he has never belonged to anywhere or to anyone. He felt a sense of emptiness and despair during his childhood. He is a victim of man-made destructive social and political forces. The incidents which had taken place during his childhood world were traumatic. The Nazi regime made his father suffer. He found himself a stranger in the land of his birth and childhood. He is a German, but the Nazi Germany has no place for him. The increasing hatred against the Jews forced Hugo to flee Berlin leaving his mother behind. He is uprooted from his native soil and native sky.

During his life-long stay in India, Hugo does not assimilate himself with Indian problems. Ups and downs related to Indian soil do not touch him. He remains misfit, “a firangi”(Desai, 10), never related to the world around him. There is an unfathomable gap between Hugo and the Indians around. He can never fit himself into the mainstream of Indian life. As a result, he experiences a sense of social and cultural alienation.

The traumatic experiences he has undergone during his childhood, lack of parental love and cruel circumstances around him were responsible for not developing a free personality. Therefore, he remains taciturn. His estrangement from his people and land makes him incapable of having any interactions with people around him and unburden himself. He feels mortified. He retreats in his shell as a “crab” or as a “turtle.” (Desai, 109)

Baumgartner's Bombay does project Anita Desai's particular mood as she presents Hugo's life full of a series of hollow gestures, which can be seen as a mark of alienation from society. Hugo exists without any meaningful interactions either with the society or the world. The purposefulness of life leaves Hugo in a state of the absurd. Hugo lives an absurd and meaningless life. Hugo has his legitimate aspirations and wishes. But his aspirations and wishes go waste due to hostile and cruel social and political circumstances. Believing in a struggle of life, Hugo tries hard to rise, but in vain. In reality, he does not have any human company to love.

“He does not know the joys of married life, has never experienced the loving care of a wife or shared moments of laughter and warmth with children”
(Dhawan, 53)

He showers his love and affection on his cats – his only companions in a crowded city. He moves on the roads in Bombay along with his cats collecting pieces of stale bread and food to feed his cats. He remains “a firanghi” in Bombay, never related to the world around him. The world also does not accept him. He is called “the madman of the Cats, the billewallah pagal.” (Desai, 10) All these factors help us understand absurdity and meaninglessness in Hugo's life which make him undergo social and cultural alienation.

Anita Desai makes it explicit through her every novel that nothing can bridge the gap when one is psychologically alienated. When a person is unsuccessful in coping with the internal defense mechanism, the external pressures become unbearable. Consequently, his grip on himself becomes tenuous and precarious. Man, so alienated and isolated, entraps himself in life-denying attitude and prevents his self-fulfillment. In addition to this, *Baumgartner's Bombay* clearly reveals Anita Desai's wider and positive attitude towards life. All the bullying and torture fail to distort the essential Baumgartner. He does not become a person who hates or avoids society. He also does not carry any sense of bitterness against his oppressors. He remains a normal, loving individual, capable of reacting with kindness and humanness whenever the situation so demands. He is kind and hospitable to Kurt, the social rogue, who is utterly empty of human feelings. Hugo seems to have been driven by some inner force.

Finally, *Baumgartner's Bombay* is a story of the humanity's need to find sustenance with itself. It is a story of love that binds, sustains and ennobles love that brings human beings to



one another and responds to their innermost need for human worth. The surrounding of racial hatred in Germany shrivels Hugo and leaves him singled. His search for the bonds that make living meaningful brings him to India. He tries to establish a bond of relationship with a number of people in Venice, Bombay and Calcutta. The novel also presents Anita Desai's views about human relationship. She seems to believe that human relationship is humanity's bull work against all that threatens and undermines a human being's desire for fuller life. Her views about human relationship are totally devoid of cynicism. She seems to believe in man's inner abilities. She believes that man is able to generate good. She expects man to take a full cognizance of the existence of evil existing around him.

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