



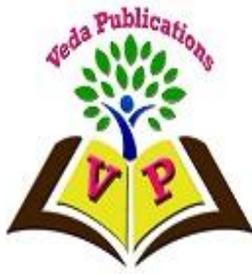
ANITA DESAI'S *BAUMGARTNER'S BOMBAY*- LOSS OF IDENTITY - A NOWHERE MAN

Dr Usha Sakure

(Associate Professor, HOD, Department of English, M.K.Mahavidyalaya, Nagpur, Maharashtra.)

[doi: https://doi.org/10.33329/joell.63.39](https://doi.org/10.33329/joell.63.39)

ABSTRACT



Modern age is an age of anxiety, where a contemporary man is constantly in search of ways, in which he can with dignity; confront a Universe which has become aimless, purposeless and absurd. This can also be because of the fast dwindling human and traditional values which have degraded. They are being estranged from each others due to cultural and social differences, a problem that can be solved, when a person has learnt to accept himself. The strength of the Modern literary imagination lies in the evocation of the individual's predicament in terms of alienation and quest for identity.

Anita Desai's "*Baumgartner's Bombay*" describes the perspective of a German Jewish holocaust survivor, facing with the crisis of identity, trying hard but failing miserably to connect the histories of Germany and India. This paper examines how this character witnesses a multiplicity of cultural shocks, Geographical displacements and diasporic network that dismantles the solidity of official history and grants a meaning to the desolate experience of exile. Hugo the prime protagonist experiences a quest for being Solitary, as to Anita Desai only the individual, the solitary being, is of interest. She deals with the question of self again, the search for root and identity and explores the Indian sensibility, complexity of human relationships and ethos. Hugo is no different, who is accepting things as it comes, but is not being accepted, he becomes the unacceptable, loses his identity to become a Nowhere Man.

Keywords: *Inner World, Quest, Anxiety, Frustrations, Alienation, Wanderer.*



Anita Desai has undoubtedly been recognized as one of the prominent voices among Indian writers in English. Writer par repute she has gained a prominent place in Indian English Literature. She has passed through various stages giving priorities to different perspectives in her different works. In one novel, she creates a fantasy world and in other she crashes it and deals with reality. She has opened up new vistas and given new directions and forms to novel writings. She is the one who mainly deals with the inner human recesses of the inner world of her characters. To her, nothing is more important than the inner consciousness of her characters. Prof Jasbir Jain discovers in Mrs Desai's fiction:

"The world of Anita Desai's novels is an ambivalent one, it is a world where central harmony is aspired to but not arrived at, and the desire to love and live clashes, at times violently- with the desire to withdraw and achieve harmony. Involvement and stillness are incompatible by their nature yet they strive to exist together. Instinct and emotion and passion seem to be strangers in the world of daily routine and scurry away into dark corners to flourish in conditions of solitude which is presented in its varying shades and meanings".

A study of her novels reveals her persistent concern with the themes of anxiety, boredom which threatens their individual identity and finds the world they live in, too complex to handle. The characters that appear calm and composed to the outer world are filled with rising storm inside, invisible to the laymen. She goes beyond the skin, layer by layer to bring out to the surface the constant struggle that rage a human soul and describes the inner atmosphere with such ease that no one else can conquer to this extent as she does. There is an intense questioning of the protagonists as they are torn between their self and the conflicting human situation.

He feels that he has no role to play in this world. But once born, he found himself assimilated in to the environment that is full of problems,

extremely complex and confusing. The stage is set for him; he has to play a defined role in the self composed drama of life up till his last breath that he is destined to take. He cannot be a mere spectator he has to make through the odds and eventualities of life that is full of problems, extremely complex and confusing. He suffers a rootlessness which gets manifested in the alienation from oneself. As R.K Dhawan points out:

"The hiatus between what the individual aspires for and the hard reality of what he achieves, between what he professes and what he practices...has mercilessly crumpled his life, leaving an insidious effect on his inner being."

Obviously the quest for the self has become the basic paradox of life as each individual takes his journey to outsmart and outshine others. In fact the quest for life and love and pervading feeling of apprehension corrodes Hugo and he finds no return. *Baumgartner's Bombay* the tenth novel, published in 1988 of the acclaimed writer Anita Desai, more poignant than other novels, featuring a German Jew named Hugo Baumgartner, narrates his story from his affluent childhood days in Germany to the horror of his murder in India by another German. He was a nowhere man, he was too dark skinned for Nazi Germany and too pale to be accepted by the residing Indians. He was accepted by none which defined his plight. Due to the paleness of his complexion he was imprisoned alongside the Nazis, declared a criminal instead of a refugee. Throughout the novel he was treated as an outsider.

Baumgartner's Bombay reveals the quest of its chief Protagonist Hugo's identity. The novel opens up with a quotation of T.S Eliot famous lines from *East Coker*- "In the beginning is my end". He spent his early childhood in Berlin and came to Calcutta and then went to Bombay. In India he gradually adapts an attitude of reconciliation and compromise and desires to adopt India as his homeland. He feels insecure and finds no future for his belongings. He always lives in a dilemma, doubts and frustrations in his quest for identity. Accepting but not being accepted was the irony of his situation. Hugo as a man comes to India and even becomes a citizen. He



now perceives radiance in his mind and desires to put an end to all man made barriers:

“ he realized it only now: that during his constant wandering, his ceaseless walking, he had been drawing closer to this discovery of that bewitched point where they became one land of which he felt himself the natural citizen.”(p 63)

He had to flee to Bombay due to the civil war between Hindus and Muslims in Calcutta. He lived a hermit like life there with his cats. First he flees to Berlin then to Calcutta and finally to Bombay only to meet his doom, he settles nowhere, he is a nowhere man, depicting the theme of alienation, and offers a perspective study of his sense of suffering, utter fragmentation, isolation and exclusion that are similar to the conditions of displacement and aloofness. Baumgartner, moreover, is like Nirode of Voices in the City, he is a troubled and weak character of Anita Desai who indulges in lots of adjustments and finds his life dull and monotonous, not in his control and swayed by circumstances. Bombay and India are simply his existential condition to face his existential crisis. His story revolves round his childhood days in Germany to his death. He came to India to adhere to the sense of belongingness, but on the contrary is betrayed by his friends like Habibibulla and Chimanlal's son.

He is unable to belong to India because of his physical features and language barriers. In spite of his absolute sincerity and uncommon capacity to identify himself with those who come in contact with him, he remains an alien. He withdraws into his own world disinterested. Social acceptance is also a factor that creates a sense of identity in a person but, then the social milieu fails to recognize him as an individual; he tends to lose his identity. Geographical displacement, cultural uprooting and failure to connect with his own self and the world writes his doom. The political crisis served more to his aloofness and alienation.

He is so much fed off with human company that he prefers to stay with cats in dark, dingy and shabby flat behind the Taj Hotel. His financial sources are so meagre that he has to rely on the leftovers of a cafe for his hungry cats. On one occasion he helps a

poor German boy and brings him home. But again, the cruel destiny has something else in store as the boy kills Baumgartner just to get hold of his money in the form of silver trophies, and runs away. Baumgartner's Bombay is thus a portrayal of loneliness and abject disaster where the protagonist is unable to resolve his dilemmas and his predicament is beyond any solution.

He tries his level best to connect to the people of India, but to his utter disappointment, he fails miserably. He was unable to develop a sense of belongingness in India, he remains an outsider here, being a nowhere man, he does not belong to Germany either because he was a Jew or in India he was a 'Phirangi'. He was unacceptable in both lands. He should have survived the adversities that he landed himself into. He was more attached to his mother and thought that he will make her happy when in India, as he promised her to make a new home, drive the snakes away and said that he will bring golden oranges for her. But once, he landed in India he felt alienated and loneliness surrounded him from all sides. The absence of his mother makes him very sad. On his very first day in India he feels:

“and wishes “to have a hand settle on his wrist, lead him”(P33).

Time and again he remembers his mother and her absence makes him vulnerable and he wishes to go to a place and mourn silently unwatched by others, “Like a sick animal”

Unfulfilled desires and dissatisfaction took him backwards. The impact of the social and political situation in India also plays a significant role. The bitterness of the political upheaval made his life miserable. His situation aggravates when he knows that Germany has been destroyed and he gets no news of his mother. This shatters him completely. He finds Calcutta more suitable to mourn his loneliness. His thoughts and feelings are echoed by the city.

“The Calcutta of the black street, the steaming rubbish strips, scattered tenements, its hunger, its squalor, its desolation.”(p 166)

He is utterly shaken and a sense of insecurity creeps in. He is unable to come to terms with life, due to hopelessness, despair and anguish.



Bewildered, and living in abject penury he recalls his childhood days, he escapes into his past and finds solace in the time spent with his wealthy father and graceful mother. He longs for the familiar surroundings and appearances. He finds solace in escapism and tries to run away from his existing situation. Withdrawal and resignation cannot do him any good and sometimes he resorts to aggressive behaviour and violence. Hugo's helplessness and loneliness at times makes him suppress his aggressive tendencies. He is all alone and never wished to lead such a life, torn apart by his idealized and real self which leads him to a self destructive phase. The city becomes the reflection of his own inner self. He wants to:

"Return to that enclosed world, the neat barracks, the vegetable fields, the fixed hours of bath, the meals, lectures, drills the release from the pressures of the outer world." (p 162)

He is so much used to the isolation that he regrets human presence of any form; everyone seems to threaten his solitude and the very existence. His inner rage and anger are symbolically shown when he watched:

"the fires that burnt in the city, their hot glow reflected by the smouldering mass of fog and smoke that buried them all and did not allow the flames to escape".(p 172)

He finds no outlet for his injured soul. The city itself becomes an embodiment of inner voice and frustrations:

"There was nothing in it or around it that was not broken or decayed- the high wall was crumbling the palm trees were lopped, the portico was falling down, the light bulbs were smashed, the banisters and stairs broken,"(p 165).

Disgruntled and dissatisfied he turns to aggression to cope up with the stressful situation. He is utterly dissatisfied with his life and his existential despair leads him to chaos and confusion. His story has been a sad book on disenchantment, loneliness and eternal yearning to find oneself his internal

pathos and struggle to find his identity in an increasing polarized world;

"They saw him bring bags of food, knew he had a wallet in his pocket, wore a watch in his wrist, good shoes on his feet, old, patched, yes but still shoes, more that they had or ever could buy,, and he wondered what prevented them from grabbing him by the neck and stripping him in the dark. The nakedness of their street lives made him feel overloaded with belongings, and he felt their accusations whenever he passed."(p 145)

Thus Baumgartner's Bombay goes a step ahead in revealing the dilemma of human life and brings into focus the emotional state of a European Jew who explores the basic question of loss of identity. Every human being has a self identity, which includes an awareness of being human or an individual. He is capable of making choices that affect his own life as well as others. He tries to make an attempt to find where he stands in relation with others, through self- analysis.

The ideal self is chipped and hampered by others and the external reality – is rejected pushed aside to make place for the self and this is what Hugo tried to attain all his life to prove his existence and to attain the wholeness in his life. Wholeness does not imply completeness but it implies integration to constitute a whole the characters move backwards and forward and fluctuate; they are inter related. Without obtaining the liberation of the self any move in the direction of withdrawal leads to chaos. Man must have an intention by which he can mould himself in relation to others. Hugo moves between the two extremes and fails to analyze his true self; he seems to be surrounded by series of quests. He considered himself overburdened with possessions, when he thought of himself in relation to others. He remains a wanderer and a searcher, through his disinterestedness and resignation he attains a perfect tranquillity of mind.

WORKS CITED

Anita Desai, Baumgartner's Bombay, (London: Heinemann, 1988.)



Bhatnagar, Vinita Dhondiyal. 'Readings in Indian Literature',

New Delhi, Harmen Publishing House 2001.

Chattopadhyay, Kamladevi, Inner Recesses Outer

Spaces(New Delhi: Navrang Prakashan, 1986.

Dhawan R.K, 'Explorations in Modern Indo English Fictions',

Bahri Publications, New Delhi, 1982. P 123.

Jasbir Jain, Anita Desai Indian English Novelists, (New Delhi:

Sterling Publishers, 1982) p. 23.

Shrivastava, Ramesh Kumar, "Perspective on Anita Desai",

published by Vimal Prakashan, Ghaziabad, 1984.
