



Sense of Cultural Alienation and Estrangement in Anita Desai's 'Baumgartner's Bombay'

Ragamayee K

Assistant Professor, CVR College of Engineering, Hyderabad, India

Received: 25 Sep 2022; Received in revised form: 11 Oct 2022; Accepted: 15 Oct 2022; Available online: 21 Oct 2022

©2022 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— *The feeling of belongingness gives strength and confidence and makes one feel connected with the people and the place. There is probably no exact term to describe a feeling of not belonging anywhere. One feels isolated and alienated even amidst people. A sense of estrangement creeps in even when one is surrounded by people. It is a strange situation when one is forced to leave one's native place as there is nothing left and is forced to flee to a place where he is not accepted for he doesn't belong to that new place. The turmoil experienced by the individual in such situations and the variations in cultures across borders is well portrayed by Anita Desai in her 1988 novel, 'Baumgartner's Bombay'. The paper attempts to focus on the inner nooks of the internal psyche experienced by the protagonist Hugo throughout his life journey. A paradox of belonging to and not belonging is felt at the same time by the protagonist. Anita Desai portrays the cultural disparities and sense of estrangement with an authentic excellence.*

Keywords— *Culture, alienation, estrangement, cross cultures, borders.*

I. INTRODUCTION

An outcast, a pariah, an alien, the list may go on to describe the synonyms of the feeling of not belonging to a particular place. The terms are only close to each other but the real trauma and the turmoil undergone by an individual is not easy to express. The feeling developed because of a strange situation where the person is born and brought up in a place but cannot continue to stay there due to various situations prevailing at that time. A sense of not belonging creeps in and so is forced to flee to a new place. The place is new not just in terms of geographical differences but the cultural variations make him feel out of place. The people also do not accept him as he is a pariah and does not belong to the place.

Anita Desai could bring out the true essence of the feelings and the experience undergone by Hugo through her novel, 'Baumgartner's Bombay'. She is an Indian author born in Mussoorie, India to a German mother Toni Nimme and Bengali (Indian) father D.N.Mazumdar. She grew up speaking German at home and other Indian languages like Bengali, Urdu, Hindi and English outside the house. As a

child, she was closely associated with Indian culture and she visited Germany later in her life. With her knowledge at school, English became her literary language and she began to write at the age of seven. Her first story was published at the age of nine. This reveals her association with German and English languages and her exposure to both the cultures. Though the novel is written in English basically, Desai showers Indian languages along with German and Hebrew into the narrative through quotations and dialogues complementing the transnational setting of the novel. Not just the languages, the novel also presents a diverse geological and a varied cultural landscape, featuring Berlin, Venice, Calcutta and Bombay.

II. THEME

Some of the basic themes dealt with in Desai's novels are alienation, marital relationships, struggle for existence, victimization of the weak, search for identity, existential predicament and the like. It can be observed that her protagonists mostly suffer from a feel of alienation and consequently a deep sense of existential anguish. She

excels in presenting the psychological mayhem of the characters through her narration, thus taking the readers on a ride into the innermost recesses of the characters. She also employs the modern techniques of fiction like the stream of consciousness, interior monologue, symbolic use of evocative imagery, use of Nature representing good and evil, use of city life in comparison and contrast to the village atmosphere, and many other themes to reveal the psychic status of her characters.

The novel, 'Baumgartner's Bombay' is Desai's tenth novel written in 1988, depicting the story of a German Jew named Hugo Baumgartner who flees the Holocaust to Bombay. The life of Hugo depicts his struggle for existence and sense of belonging to and not belonging to. The irony is in the title of the novel reflecting belongingness, 'Baumgartner's Bombay', indicating the place Bombay belonging to Baumgartner, whereas it doesn't belong to him in the first place and on the contrary, he is not accepted but treated as an alien or a pariah, and is termed as firanghi or a foreigner. It is also equally misleading to mention the association with only Bombay, where as the novel is set as much in Berlin and Calcutta as in Bombay.

Paul West in his review entitled, "The man Who Doesn't Belong" published in the New York Times (1989) reflects thus,

"This is a daring, colorful novel almost impossible to absorb in one reading, and rightly so because it's about imperfect knowledge. The very title, with its quasi-guide book roll, set me wondering. Does it, like a "Fodor's Beijing", flirt with completeness, or does it remind us how subjective all knowledge is and therefore how unreliable? Like Anita Desai, who has a subtle mind, we can get the best of both nations if we make the key phrase into a title: 'Baumgartner's Bombay' sounds at once authoritative and tentative. If, however, we gently offer "Fagin's London" or "Heathcliff's Liverpool" (he was found there, remember), the phrase implies the mellow dignities of bias. What Ms. Desai depicts here is how one particular man's presence in a city alters that city for everyone in it, himself too; and then he thinks: Since I change it, I know it. What can a mote know? We savor Ms. Desai's title as a thoughtful emblem of the novel it adorns."

III. TITLE

Anita Desai chose the theme and the title with utmost care, and even the names of the characters are selected very

carefully. The name of the protagonist, Baumgartner attempts to show association with the environment, Baum meaning tree, and gartner meaning the gardener is indicative of the connection of man with the environment. It cannot be denied as strange coincidence that his profession or his father's rather is that of a timber merchant being related to his name. Hugo moves to Bombay and spends nearly thirty years of his life, but ironically, it could never become 'His' place-

"The life of Bombay which had been Baumgartner's life for thirty years now-or rather, the setting of his life; he had never actually entered it, never quite captured it; damply, odorously, cacophonously palpable as it was, it had been elusive still" (255).

Surviving the holocaust and being forced to flee to India leaves an indelible mark on Hugo's mind. His attempts to feel at place only increase his feeling of being out of place. He is not accepted as Indian. He remains a foreigner and is treated as one because of his looks and appearance and the cultural differences. The physical alienation is displayed through the historical experience of war and displacement and the psychological alienation from the 'mother tongue' as there is no clear suggestive alternative language to express the consciousness and interior monologues of the character. The narrative constantly presents an emphasis on language to establish both Baumgartner's position as the representative of the human and as the other, the alienated (Jewish) presence that haunts the novel.

IV. ALIENATION

The sense of not belonging to is expressed in a clear and subtle manner by Desai through her depiction of the humble nature of the character. Hugo is a Berlin Jew who, in an attempt to escape the Nazis, reaches India and settles in a seedy apartment behind Taj Hotel in Bombay. He lives with cats and for cats; he doesn't mind even being called, 'The Mad man of the Cats'. He starts his day with a plastic bag to fetch food for his cats which is actually the remnants of the food from the restaurants in the small, narrow lanes of Bombay populated by the native Indians who are themselves refugees of famines and draughts. The group of people is in itself a mix including Hiramani, Taraporevala, Barodekar, Coelho, Da Silva and Patel. He is confused as he doesn't know which language to use as they don't share a common language. He is so sensitive and selfless as he politely attempts to greet them and mumbles an all purpose, inadequate "Good morning, Salaam".

Despite spending so many years, Hugo does not belong at this address, or in the down-at-heel Café de Paris next

door. He didn't belong in the detention camp for Germans that the Indians held him in for six years during World War II. Nor did he belong to Calcutta where he first came and lived happily before the war. Life became increasingly complicated and dangerous in Berlin, so he didn't belong there either. His childhood though was bright and rich as his father owned a furniture showroom, tramped the streets with an ivory-knobbed cane, only to end up in Dachau. So he didn't belong there.

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

Hugo suffered this feeling of being isolated and different from the main stream right from his childhood. As a child he wouldn't understand the reason or being treated differently, nor did he know how to deal with the situations. Being a Jew, he was denied the pleasures of the outside world. Once in a Christmas party, the children at school were sent presents by their parents. But Hugo didn't receive any as even their parents were not aware of this. Hugo feels isolated and cut off from other children. His mind is filled with shame and agony. 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)

As he grows older and the changing situations, Hugo develops a sense of not belonging to or a pariah as he is always treated as a firanghee (foreigner), but not tired of his attempts to get familiar and acquainted with the surroundings. Hugo's best friend was an Indian businessman named Chimanlal who cared for Hugo genuinely and served as his patron. Chimanlal and Hugo continue to enjoy their friendship and they buy a racehorse together and go to the track where they win several trophies. But unfortunately these trophies turn out to be the real cause behind Hugo's murder by a drug-addicted German hippie who wanted them for money.

The theme of the novel presents a simple of life that whatever happens in your life, you are responsible for it and you have to deal with it, come what may. Life may throw you challenges, but you should not succumb to the situations. Desai portrays such things in a very subtle manner dealing with the practical implications. Hugo is always humble and hopeful and never gives up. He tries to search for alternatives and attempts to feel secure and accepted.

"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)

Anita Desai depicts a vivid picture of life through her novels and makes it evident that there is no rescue from the psychological alienation. One should learn to cope with the internal conflict so as to be prepared to handle the external pressures and avoid being tenuous and precarious. Hugo doesn't develop hatred towards the society or the system but tries to remain a normal loving individual politely reacting to the situations what so ever. He is even kind to Kurt, the social rogue, who is utterly devoid of sensitive human feelings.

V. CONCLUSION

The novel thus exemplifies the sense of estrangement and the human need to find solace and sustenance within itself. Hugo is like a representative of humanity that bonds people together and brings out the true meaning of life. His faith in human relationship and bonds brings him to India. He makes a sincere attempt from his side to associate with the people around in Venice, Calcutta and Bombay. Like many of Desai's novels, 'Baumgartner's Bombay' is also a literary treat to her readers. The spider web narration, the frequent shifting of the time from present to past, the inclusion of other languages to bring in the natural flavor and the innate authenticity with which she presents the cultural variations makes the novel to add to the list of 'must read'.

REFERENCES

- [1] Anita Desai. Baumgartner's Bombay. London: Penguin Books, 1989.
- [2] Paul West. The Man Who Does not Belong. The New York Times. April 9, 1989.
- [3] Dhawan R.K. "The Nowhere Man: A Comparative Study of Anita Desai's Baumgartner's Bombay and Kamala Markandeya's The Nowhere Man". Indian Women Novelists, set II Vol.1, 1993.