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Hugo's Alienated Self: A Study of Anita Desai's *Baumgartner's Bombay*

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Abstract:

Anita Desai has established herself as the forerunner among the Indo-English novelists excelling in dealing with the most vital problem of modern human life i.e. alienation. Desai's protagonists are alienated individuals who have set out on a quest for meaning in their lives and their authentic self-hood. The integral part of the essential human condition like tensions, frustrations, loss of identity and despair create an existential vacuum in the lives of her characters, and lead to their disintegrated personality. She takes up various aspects of alienation syndrome and brings to surface the grieving painful hostility prevalent in the personal, social and cultural relations of the protagonists. The nothingness and futility of life torments them and compels them to seek fulfillment and contentment in a lonely and secluded existence. *Baumgartner's Bombay* is a saga of homelessness, loss of individuality and alienation due to relocation. It portrays the predicament of Hugo Baumgartner, a native of Germany who grew up as a lonely child and an isolated youth. He is a wandering Jew who is forced by circumstances to leave Berlin prior to the Second World War and suffers rootlessness throughout his life. He experiences social and cultural estrangement in India where he lives for almost fifty years and is relieved from his anguish and sense of exile only by the cruel clutches of death.

Keywords: Alienation, rootlessness, loss of identity

Hugo is the most pitiable among Desai's male characters and suffers the most as he is alienated from his homeland as well as the adopted land. He longs for his native soil and yearns unfathomably to be in the company of his mother but the Holocaust followed by the Second World War not only devastates his place of birth but also kills his mother thereby curbing his desire to return. He leads a life of solitude in an alien land where he always feels as an outsider addressed as 'firanghi, foreigner': "Accepting - but not accepted; that was the story of his life, the one thread that ran through it all. 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 firanghi. In both lands, the unacceptable" (29).

Hugo's predicament is also similar to Srinivas' of Kamla Markandaya's *The Nowhere Man* who is compelled to feel as an 'outsider' even after staying in England for fifty years. But unlike Srinivas, Hugo is the actual nowhere man who neither belongs to his own nation because of being a Jew nor to the place of adoption where he is a 'firanghi'. Hugo settles in India as a businessman and even after long years of stay he is looked down upon and is made aware of his outlandishness which makes him feel as an outcast in a familiar world. He always feels "uncertain and scuffles and shuffles through the narrow lanes, and alleys of Bombay avoiding

the main street as if he did not want to offend anybody by his presence” (Indira 50). The divorce between his personality and the milieu alienate him beyond recovery. As cited in an interview, this novel is Desai’s first attempt to remake in fiction the memory of her own German and maternal ancestry. It also exposes the horrors of war and its impact on human psyche.

Hugo has suffered the pangs of identity crisis since childhood and experienced a mixed feeling of pleasure and pain on recalling his boyhood. His father had a well-to-do furniture business and walked with “a special air of prosperity and satisfaction – like a bee that has stored much honey...” (36). His mother was very loving and appeared to him very graceful. Though they lived peacefully, Hugo’s parents pursued different tastes and temperaments. He felt himself and his mother to be imprisoned in the authoritarian house of his father where they had no freedom of thought and action. When he was not taken to the horse race by his father, he looked at his mother “with the hatred of one prisoner for another” (45). His mother surmounted her frustration by singing songs but Hugo failed to find a vent to his exasperation. Even the nursery rhymes which the mother sang depicted the dark side of the experiences of his childhood. When once he accompanied his mother to Grunewald, he found himself free from the “masculine atmosphere created by his father” (57). He enjoyed the beauty of nature and felt happy at “...the remarkable sight of his mother flowering in the company of her friends...” (57). He discovered his mother’s voice “lift and fly with lightheartedness and relief, and he wondered why she did not come oftener if it made her so happy” (58). His mother’s changed outlook made him sense “...a rift, a break between his parents that might have existed for all these years but of which he was only now really aware. He kept his eye on his mother, suddenly so much younger and, he felt, exposed and vulnerable” (58). In school, at a Christmas party, he felt as an outsider and unwanted when his parents forgot to send a gift for him while he watched other children rejoicing with their gifts. This instilled a feeling of inferiority in him and made him think if “...he did not belong to the picture-book world of the fir tree, the gifts and the celebration?” (47). He withdrew from the school to escape the unpleasant atmosphere there and was even unhappy with his new Jewish school where the feeling of rejection is solidified when teased by children: “Baumgartner’s dumb, has a nose like a thumb!” (49). This is perhaps the first glimpse of alienation and displacement that constitutes his identity ever after. After the death of his father he stopped going to school as he felt responsible to take care of his mother. He even worked as an accountant in his father’s sold-away furniture shop to support himself and his mother. Though he was happy to leave school as he could again escape the hysterical teacher and the strange language but soon realised that “the school had an element of robust reality that appealed to him, that he had been learning to deal with and even enjoy, and that he missed in the hushed pallor of his own home” (63). Due to his lack of schooling he loses the opportunity of intermingling and adjusting, and it also puts an end to the friendships he had begun to make. It further results in his lack of exposure to life outside his home which later affects his adult life as he is not able to interact freely with people around him. The abduction of his father by his own countrymen, his mother’s run from pillar to post to know his whereabouts, father’s subsequent suicide, the crumbling family business and the diminishing future prospects in his homeland have a cramping influence on his psyche. Since childhood experiences have an ineffaceable mark on the adulthood, Hugo’s unpleasant childhood adversely affects his growth as a healthy individual.

Hugo’s physical appearance is also a cause of his estrangement from the society and Indian culture as people look at him with awe and wonder. They find him quite strange and unfamiliar and even after fifty years of stay in India:

The Indian sun...had not tanned and roasted him to the colour of a native. His face blazed like an over-ripe tomato in the sun on which warts gathered like flies. His hair would not turn dark; it stood out around the bald centre like a white ruff, stained somewhat yellow. Even if he had used hair-dye and boot polish, what could he have done about his eyes? It was not that they were blue – far from it; his mother...had called them ‘dark’ eyes, *dunkele Augen*’, but Indians did not seem to think them so. (28-29)

He feels ostracised and desperately wants to make a place for himself in the alien country. He desires to call his mother to stay along with him and wishes to be darker one day to be accepted. The watchman doesn’t consider him worth talking to and smiles faintly “out of his politeness but with a twist of distaste at the corner of his mouth” (12). Apart from his physical idiosyncrasy, language also acts as a barrier between him and the foreign territory and he thinks of building a new language to suit the new conditions as he could no longer use German, and English was incomprehensible to him. He is surrounded by people who either communicate in English or Hindi or Bengali and he simply picks words from them to suit his needs: “*chai, khana, baraf, lao jaldi, joota, chota peg, pani, karma, soda, garee...*” (112). Baumgartner thus encounters the values of different cultures through numerous languages.

Hugo makes efforts to adopt the Indian way of life and develop a sense of belongingness as he thinks Germany to have wiped away from the earth. In spite of his willingness to be a native of Hindustan, and having lived for half a century at a place which was now familiar than any other landscape on earth, he is still a foreigner. He fails to learn any of the Indian languages and even loses touch with his mother tongue as it becomes unfamiliar to his tongue and ears with the passage of time. He remains a non-entity in India with a different complexion, language and religion. Actually, Hugo becomes aware of the difference between his dreams and reality on his very first day in India when he is taken to a cheap hotel instead of instructing the tonga (horse carriage) to the Taj Hotel. He is disgusted at its ambience but soon realises it to be better affordable than the Taj. This first experience on the foreign land diminishes his desire to search for the India of his dreams. India always remains ineludibly alien to Baumgartner from the moment of his arrival on this land when he looks in vain for “a signboard...in a familiar language, a face with a familiar expression” (101) to the last days of his life when he still feels “uncertain as ever of which language to employ” (13) to greet a native watchman.

Hugo’s cultural alienation and rootlessness is an outcome of the political upheaval in Germany and India. He is a quintessence of the catastrophic displacements suffered by people all over the world in the past as well as in the twenty first century which haunts their existence and alienate them. He is a victim of political alienation as the German anti-Semitism separates him from his mother and while he was trying to adjust to the way of life in Calcutta, the Second World War breaks and lands him into an internment camp in Ahmednagar where the “hostile aliens from all over the country were poured like ants from a closed fist into a bowl of dust, and swarmed there in a kind of frenzy...” (127). The political and social conditions prevailing in the society have an adverse effect on his existence but his inability and incompetence to influence the political decisions affecting his life render him a victim of powerlessness. Captivity enables him to be in the company of fellow Germans but his introvert and conservative nature averts him from seeking their company. His unwholesome childhood and lonely youth inhibit the development of his individuality which mars his ability to freely interact with people around him. He nurtures isolation and loneliness and never shares his fears for his mother and about the

devastation in Germany with any of his fellow prisoners letting it “become a dark, monstrous block” (131) inside him. The other internees seek company to pour out their anxieties and obsessions while Hugo “like a mournful turtle – carried everything with him; perhaps it was the only way he knew to remain himself” (132). He finds himself secure in the internment camp and is unnerved at the thought of his release as here he could pretend that he was not solitary, but outside, he would be all alone without a family and a country. Though bored by the lifeless monotony of the camp, Hugo is beguiled by the place as it provided a refuge, even if temporary. He is gnawed by the fear of survival and feels incapacitated and unfit for the outer world and thus finds “himself shivering on a hot summer night, as abjectly as a dog who senses he is about to be turned out into the street” (159). After being freed from the camp he is struck with fear and terror when he encounters pre-partition violence and the Hindu-Muslim clashes in Calcutta. He decides to move to Bombay as per Habibullah’s suggestion as he himself wanted to flee. The socio-political condition of Germany and then of India add to Hugo’s miseries and the “religious frenzy and communal strife shocks him into a searing awareness of his lone plight” (Swain 7). He remains a ‘nowhere man’ ever.

Withdrawal and escapism is always adopted as a safe measure by Hugo to cope with the unpleasant situations in his life. He conforms to what Sartre says: “our essential and immediate behaviour with respect to anguish is flight”. So, he flees every time he encounters a trouble in order to evade it. He withdraws from his school to avoid facing his classmates after an ignominious scene at Christmas celebration. He leaves Germany, though unwillingly, to escape the tyranny of war. When Calcutta is struck by communal riots he escapes to Bombay. His incompetence to handle unfavourable circumstances often leads him to regress to his childhood. He could never abandon his past and it keeps on haunting him wherever he goes. Even on his journey to Calcutta on train he feels the shadow alongside the train to be a “shadow of the past, of elsewhere, of what had been and could never be abandoned – an animal in its grey pelt...in the darkness, it continued to chase the train, chase Baumgartner” (108). Failure to have any contact with his mother aggravates his anguish and the fear of the possibility of her death further renders him helpless. Quite often he remembers her and mourns her demise silently by retreating into the world of post cards sent by her to deduce some coherent meaning from the past. When imprisoned in the internment camp, time and again he feels nostalgic and retreats into his past days spent in Germany. His longing for the familiar surroundings of his childhood and the desire for filial love attract him towards Julius Roth’s drawings of furniture as they provide him an escape into the past. Hugo’s attraction towards Roth provided him relief from the oppression of solitude in the camp. The similarity between Roth’s drawings and the furniture sold by Hugo’s father amused him as “in this square of dust enclosed by barbed wire and watched by armed guards, he was, with Julius’s help, recreating his father’s elegant, well-lit, stylish showroom” (150). The pale blond young woman in the field “seemed to embody his German childhood” (153) though he had not known women like her in Germany. He is even sympathetic towards Kurt as his (Hugo) father had light hair similar to him. His past often becomes an obsession with him and the more he tries to detach himself from it, the more he gets attached due to his aimless and meaningless present. This escapism helps him to overcome his sense of insecurity and non-belongingness. He avoids contact with Europeans in Bombay as their queries remind him of his Jewish background and the atrocities faced by him. Even his friendship with Lotte is an attempt to develop a kind of anonymity as she never probes into his past, but they both are overwhelmed by nostalgia for their homeland.

Though Hugo pines to return to his own country but he knows “Germany when it flourished had not wanted him and Germany destroyed would have no need of him either” (199). Even after his release from the camp he desires to return back to that “enclosed world, the neat barracks...the release from the pressures of the outer world...” (193) as he feels disgusted with the filthiness of Calcutta. Imprisonment serves as a solace for him and he fears freedom as he feels psychologically alienated leading a life of unfulfilled desires and dissatisfaction. Moreover, the partition of India adversely affects his existence as Habibullah, an old business associate, snaps his relationship with him and flees from Calcutta. Hugo too escapes to Bombay to earn his living and becomes a business partner with Chimanlal. His failure to adapt himself to the human world draws him to the world of animals where he is accepted and loved unconditionally. He wants to remain invisible to the meaningless world outside and thus imprisons himself in a small flat in Hira-Niwas and engrosses with a family of cats and kittens. He is now addressed as the “Madman of the cats, the Billewallah pagal” (17) as he collected the left-over food to feed his cats. His self-effacing and submissive nature like that of Deven of *In Custody* makes him comfortable in the absence of human contact and he moves to a stage of alienation similar to that of Nirode of *Voices in the City* where “aloneness alone was the sole natural condition, aloneness alone the treasure worth treasuring” (Desai 26). But his tendency to escape into something comfortable and satisfying does not endow any succour to him as he always remains rootless and home-sick in the foreign land which he otherwise could not escape physically.

Hugo could never feel at home in the society around but felt contented in the muddled world of cats. His existence is analogous to a marginalized individual who is always undesirable. He can be called as Gramsci’s ‘subaltern’ who cannot lend a voice to his sufferings and submissively accepts the trials and tribulations of his meaningless existence. He is akin to Srinivas, who is bemused as to where he belongs. He is the ‘other’ who does not occupy a position in the mainstream of life. Hugo’s dilemma is also similar to Lotte’s as they both feel homesick and are unable to return to their homeland. They both suffer from a similar psychic void and are estranged from the milieu of their country of adoption. When they brood over their helplessness to return to their home, we are reminded of W.H. Auden’s 1939 poem, *Refugee Blues* which dramatizes the condition of Jews who fled from Nazi Germany before the Second World War.

Once we had a country and we thought it fair,
Look in the atlas and you'll find it there:
We cannot go there now, my dear, we cannot go there now.
Thought I heard the thunder rumbling in the sky;
It was Hitler over Europe, saying, "They must die":
O we were in his mind, my dear,
O we were in his mind.

Hugo’s state of friendlessness arouses a desire in him to have a person to depend upon and this brings him close to Lotte. It was not due to their German connection they shared but because “she belonged to the India of his own experience; hers was different in many ways but still they shared enough to be comfortable with each other” (180). According to R.D. Laing, “Every human being, whether child or adult, seems to require significance, that is place in another person world....It seems to be a universal human desire to wish to occupy a place in the world of at least one another person.” So Hugo depends on her emotionally and they adopt different

survival strategies to cope with adverse circumstances. Lotte's isolation leads her to excessive drinking whereas Hugo departs to the world of cats. He is unaccepted by the society throughout his stay in India and is further tormented by the losses suffered by him viz. the loss of family, home, country, business and above all the loss of bright future prospects. Moreover, the fortune eludes him as his efforts to develop a sense of brotherhood with his business associates, Habibullah and Chimanlal, is thwarted by communal riots and the death of the latter respectively. Chimanlal's son bluntly refuses to acknowledge his father's partnership with Hugo and demands a legal proof for the purchase of the race horse. The failure of Hugo's honesty and sincerity to win recognition for himself and the sense of being always rejected estranges him from the people around him. According to Subhash Chandra "it is a mutual rejection that is involved in Baumgartner's relationship with society. The society does not accept him, but then nor does he remain in the mainstream of society...." (Chandra 135). Thus having no illusions of a vivid future, he learns to adjust to his humiliating present.

The pain of being an outcast draws Baumgartner to a German boy, Kurt, at the restaurant which he often visits to collect left-over food for his clowder of cats. Seeing the pitiable condition of the boy, and having the German connection with him, Hugo takes him to his house as even the café owner insists him to do so. Hugo's kindheartedness costs him his life as he is brutally murdered by Kurt for the few silver trophies possessed by him. Lotte and Farrokh, the café owner, are moved at Hugo's tragic end whereas the other people are not even sympathetic for him. He is neglected and rejected by society even after death. The crowd gathered at the murder site feels excited as:

...it was all they could have desired, the drama, the theatre, the raw emotions, everything. Speechless, yet audible in their horror and excitement, they watched the memsahib arrive...holding together a torn red dress from which the white flesh split. It was wonderful, perfect – the memsahib giving a scream, clapping her hand to her mouth, standing struck, rushing forward, throwing herself on the corpse, weeping....All the crying anyone's heart could desire, loud and shrill and scandalous. The audience shivered with delight. (271)

The scene reveals the callousness and the materialistic nature of the society who hardly has concern for somebody's pain and sufferings. Lotte picks up the postcards sent by Hugo's mother and runs back to her place. The loss of her only companion shatters her completely. Being victims of exile and dislocation, their subjugated existence is devoid of any meaning and is a voyage from nothingness to nothingness.

Thus, it can be concluded that dislocation leads to alienation and loss of identity. Migration, a widespread phenomenon of the twentieth and the twenty-first century causes distress among migrants due to language problem, dissimilar culture, employment insecurity, racial harassment and above all the sense of loss. The displaced individuals are uprooted not only physically but emotionally and psychologically as well. The cultural shocks lead them to cultural alienation which compels the immigrants to return to their native place in search of their lost identity. The immigrant feels traumatised by experiencing the loss of his nationality, culture, family and sense of belonging. Unfortunate Hugo suffers the most as he is victimised by the ruthless society and meets a tragic end. Bijay Kumar Das aptly states – "...one can take a person out of his country but not the country out of his mind" (Das 47). An uprooted individual, whichever part of land he may belong to, in whatsoever condition he may live; fails to snap ties

with his home and seems to be in exile in the foreign land. The same pulse beats under the skin, the same suffering, the same hopes and aspirations abide in every heart and soul and this is the real beauty of existence.

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