

THE THEME OF ALIENATION IN ANITA DESAI'S *BAUMGARTNER'S BOMBAY*

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ABSTRACT

Baumgartner's Bombay is a moving account of a homeless, nationless man. He has nowhere to go to retain his lost identity. He is the same in his native soil and the alien one, an outsider, a nowhere man in every sense. Baumgartner or Hugo is literally an exile driven out of Germany due to racial discrimination, to start a new life in the friendless, unfamiliar India. Identity is a state of mind that is granted by our acceptance in the society. The problems consequent on alienation, immigration or expatriation is to be best understood in the light of the two related yet contradictory terms 'exile' and 'home'. "Home" is not merely the habitual abode; it is where one belongs to, that which gives one cultural and spiritual identity. It is one's native soil, mother country and security, which become part of one's self. 'Exile' is enforced or regretted absence from one's country or home. Literally, it means an uprooting where the mind and spirit suffers from the deprivation of sustenance it has drawn from the native soil. By focusing on Baumgartner, the dispossessed Jew, first in the twilight years of the Empire and then in postcolonial times, Desai has offered a damning indictment of not just Nazism and colonialism but also of postcolonial India, which practices its own marginalization of its economically disadvantaged sections and its ethnic, religious and regional minorities.

KEYWORDS: exile, home, alienation, marginalization.

The theme of exile, immigration and alienation is common in the twentieth century literary scene. Political, cultural, social, economical and geographical dislocations have made each man an exile. Cultural alienation has become a universal phenomenon. The *Book of Genesis* tells the story of alienation and exile. Adam and Eve were alienated from the grace of God and banished from their home, the Garden of Eden, to labour by the sweat of their brows. Ever since, exile, exodus and migration have been the fate of man. Whatever the reason for migration, the impact of cultural

dislocation on the individual psyche remains complex. A good number of Indian writers have dealt with the experience of the exile. Santha Rama Rao's *Remember the House*, Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner*, Kamala Markandya's *The Nowhere Man* and Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*, deal with the tension ensuing from cultural and geographical displacement. Anita Desai successfully portrays the ontological insecurity, alienation and anguish of the uprooted individual in ***Baumgartner's Bombay*** (1988).

More poignant than the other novels, ***Baumgartner's Bombay*** narrates the story of Hugo from his affluent childhood days in Germany to the horror of his murder in India by another German. He becomes a political exile after the anti-Jewish attitude in Germany. The political upheavals lead to the financial crisis and suicide of his father. He is forced to leave Germany in search of safer territory in India. His romantic imagination of India gets shattered the moment he lands there. He had so far visualized India as the birthplace of the *Gitanjali*. However, the political situation, like the partition of India and the anti-German attitude threatens his existence and lands him in jail. As the Nazis betrayed him in Germany, his Indian friends betray him in business. The world war further distances him from his mother, his only sustenance.

Hugo's story is one of inherent alienation augmented by global war, colonial war and religious war. When the familiar emotional and geographical worlds are destroyed, one gets de-identified. Until the end, Baumgartner remains a "firanghi" though holding an Indian passport. In the case of Baumgartner, the 'condition of living' is transformed into a 'condition of mind'. From the upholstered luxury of his infancy to the pavements of Calcutta, from the fragrance of jasmine to the repelling odour of urine, Desai has vividly captured the pathos of his rootlessness. Through Hugo, Desai plumbs the unexplored abyss of the estranged self.

Like the other Desai protagonists, Hugo, in the extremity of his solitude, bears the burden of his troubles alone. The existential predicament of Desai's protagonist borders on the recognition of the fact that death makes the world and life absurd. The arrival of the boat, which will take Hugo to the Orient, triggers off a chain of bitter feelings of estrangement:

Hugo felt a lurch of fear; he had to accept it...the prospect of at least seven days in this strange city, not only the first in which he had ever found himself alone but one so palpably foreign as to make him feel he was already

transported to the East, it had so little relation to the Europe of the north.(Desai 58)

At San Marco,

...the throngs in the chapels below, the incense in the candlewax, the flickers of light and colour in the furry dark, all oppressed him and seemed to repulse him till he was thrust out of the door into the piazza...sometimes the earnestness of the city disturbed him so much, he wondered if he would be able to face India.(Desai 60)

He would not be able to face India, since his basic needs remain unfulfilled on this alien soil. His personality disintegrates. The city life, be it Venice or San Marco, stifles him. However pleasant the milieu, Hugo persistently experiences a feeling of nausea. In the gluttonous surroundings of the piazza, "he felt himself to be inside a chocolate box, surfeited with sweetness and richness, and tore away to breathe freely" (Desai 60)

The East-West interface is a recurring motif in Indo-Anglian fiction. *Baumgartner's Bombay* elaborately deals with the lone encounters of Hugo Baumgartner with the milieu of the locales. The interface becomes a part of psychic odyssey through different locales and the changing milieu:

Venice was the east, and 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 to this discovery of that bewitched point where they became one land of which he felt himself the natural citizen...He had seen another world...it was the east, and he was both on it and travelling to it at a distance and yet one with it.(Desai 64)

Thus Hugo has a natural, instinctive fascination for the east, the East that had started taking possession of his self before he embarked for India. The prospect of embarkation had already begun to Indianize him. The transformation of his family had set in. Beautifully observed, the novel deftly recovers a lost slice of history in its portrayal of a wounded survivor. Through the scraps of time past

and time present, Desai captures the sepulchral and mossy labyrinths of Hugo's lacerated psyche struggling for an emotional release from the past, in order to adjust with the present. The past is a haunting, harrowing presence in Hugo's psyche:

...alongside the train was always the shadow of the past, of elsewhere, of what had been and could never be abandoned...an animal like a jackal in the day; a hyena in the night. In the darkness, it continued to chase the train, chase Baumgartner (Desai 89)

The past is an inextricable presence, which Hugo has to intermittently encounter in his socio- psychic travails on the Indian soil. He is an "enemy alien". The spacio-temporal progression of the story centres round his lone and renegade self. Hugo suffers a double alienation: from the native Germany, and from India. Alienation from his native land is not only matter of geographical and cultural isolation but also a problem of linguistic estrangement. German is Hugo's first language, the language of his identity and cultural filiations. In the course of the novel, this language is placed in relation to various language systems like Hebrew and various Indian languages. These languages encode the values of other cultures that Hugo encounters. The disharmonies that ensue get depicted as miscommunication or an inability to communicate. Thus, Desai interweaves Hugo's German origins and his subsequent alienation from the cultures and societies he encounters.

The roots of Hugo's colonial exile go deep into the formation of his identity. The German culture alienates him as well as provides him with a model for his estrangement and in exile; Baumgartner's cultural alienation takes corporeal form and forces him to reexamine consciously his Germanness. He fails to discern his own space of signification:

He is no system... His thoughts deteriorate at moments into the vantage point of the surreal for if he were real, then surely the scene, the setting was not. How could the two exist together in one land? The match was improbable beyond belief (Desai 93).

Baumgartner's alienation from the locale and the milieu is not deliberate as is common among expatriates. It is the result of his failure at psychic communication and identification. The series of images that Desai draws of rural India – the sting of cow dung, the odour of cattle and men, of smoke

from the village hearths, of cattle food and cattle urine, of dust, of pungent food cooking and the sight of poverty – all formed a part of his alien sensibility. This desire for communication, at the visual plane, is a unique quality with him, a trait seldom found with the other protagonists of Anita Desai. The village women talk to one another with absorption that excludes Baumgartner- a foreigner, a firanghi. They exclude him but he cannot exclude them.

Hugo is poised between timelessness and time, the Occident and the Orient, his own magic land of Utopia and India – the India of his dreams that remain alien to him. His alienation from India springs chiefly out of his failure to establish a linguistic rapport with his milieu. His linguistic incapacity brings about the disintegration of his socio-psychic self. He wanders in vain for “a signboard...in a familiar language” and towards the end of his life, he is still “uncertain as ever of which language to employ”. He does not belong to any of India’s linguistic communities. Hugo symbolizes the European culture whose colonial past not only ‘displaces’ its own subjects but also spawns out the alienation between the Orient and the Occident.

Hugo’s history is the cumulative and collective experience of Diaspora. History has dispelled Hugo as a marginal man whose centre of existence is nowhere. Hence, Hugo belongs neither to the east nor to the west. His marginality symbolizes his historical and cultural entrapment. He does not belong to the mainstream:

He felt his life blur, turn grey, like a curtain wrapping him
in his dusty belt. If he became aware from time to time that
the world beyond the curtain was growing steadily more
crowded, more clamorous, and the lives of other more
hectic, then he felt the only relief that he had never been a
part of the mainstream. Always, somehow, he had escaped
the mainstream.(Desai 211)

Baumgartner never consciously, “searched for Europeans in Bombay for company...he had ceased to crave the sound of his own language, the feel of it on his tongue”. His life at the internment camp had choked that desire. Hugo’s friendship with Lotte is not because she belonged to Germany but because she belonged to ‘Baumgartner’s India’ – the India of his voices and visions. “But from other Europeans in Bombay – he kept away, discreetly.”

In spite of its title, Desai’s text is not really about Bombay. Bombay here is merely a metaphor for an

imperial outpost, in which a refugee from another totalizing system, Nazism, meets his end. The novel is more centrally concerned with the war that Britain and its allies, fought in Europe, against the forces of Nazism, as also in the decolonization that followed this war and above all with the marginalized and dispossessed of this world. The Second World War was mainly a European war fought with thousands of soldiers from Britain's colonies, notably India, where the right of self-rule was denied to the subjects. It was also a war in which Europe's own marginal's and peripherals, the Jews and the Gypsies, were slaughtered in millions and at the end of which the Jews were transported to Palestine. The mapping of Israel, within the construct of Palestine, is one of the many running sores of Imperial cartography.

In *Baumgartner's Bombay*, the theme of language gains an international dimension. A critic has described this novel as an 'experiment in trilingual narrative'. This is so because though written mainly in English, the text also makes strategic use of German and Hindi. The novel is, in part, an evocation of Desai's evocation of her memories of her German mother. Desai herself says in an interview, "For years I wanted to write a book about the German part of my background and to put to use the German language which was part of my childhood... So I was able to ... use the German language again, which gave me a wonderful feeling of liberating a part of my mind, of myself, which I'd had to keep silenced for all of those years." (1992). The use of German in this novel also serves a political purpose, for it displaces the conventional opposition between 'empire' and 'nation' in postcolonial discourse. In the Indian context, German represents neither the colonizer's tongue, nor the devalued languages of those subjected to colonial rule. Instead, the German language is associated in Baumgartner's mind with another traumatic moment in history: the Holocaust. Desai's vision of history thus places colonialism in relation to other historical situations where members of one group have been subjugated and persecuted by those belonging to a perceived position of superiority.

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